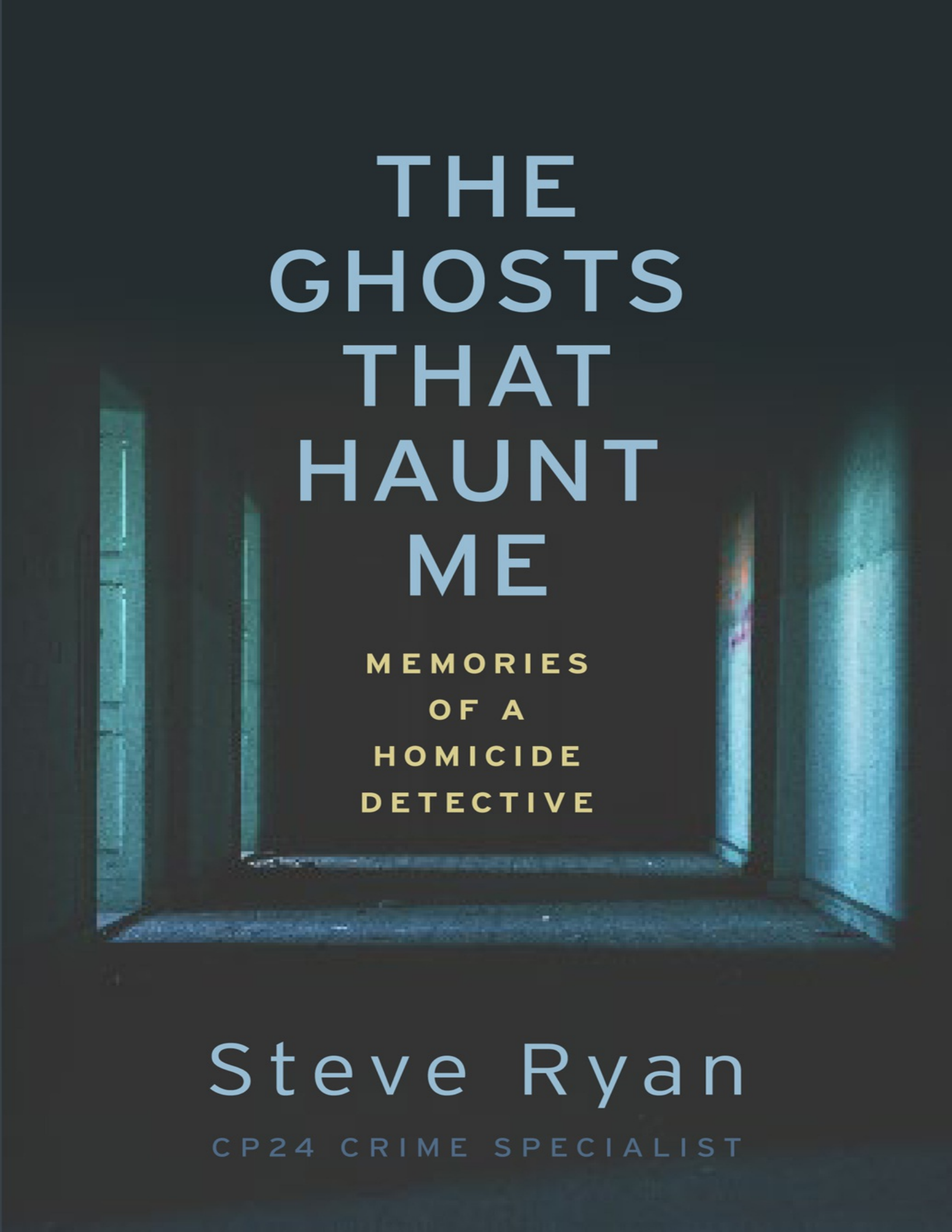
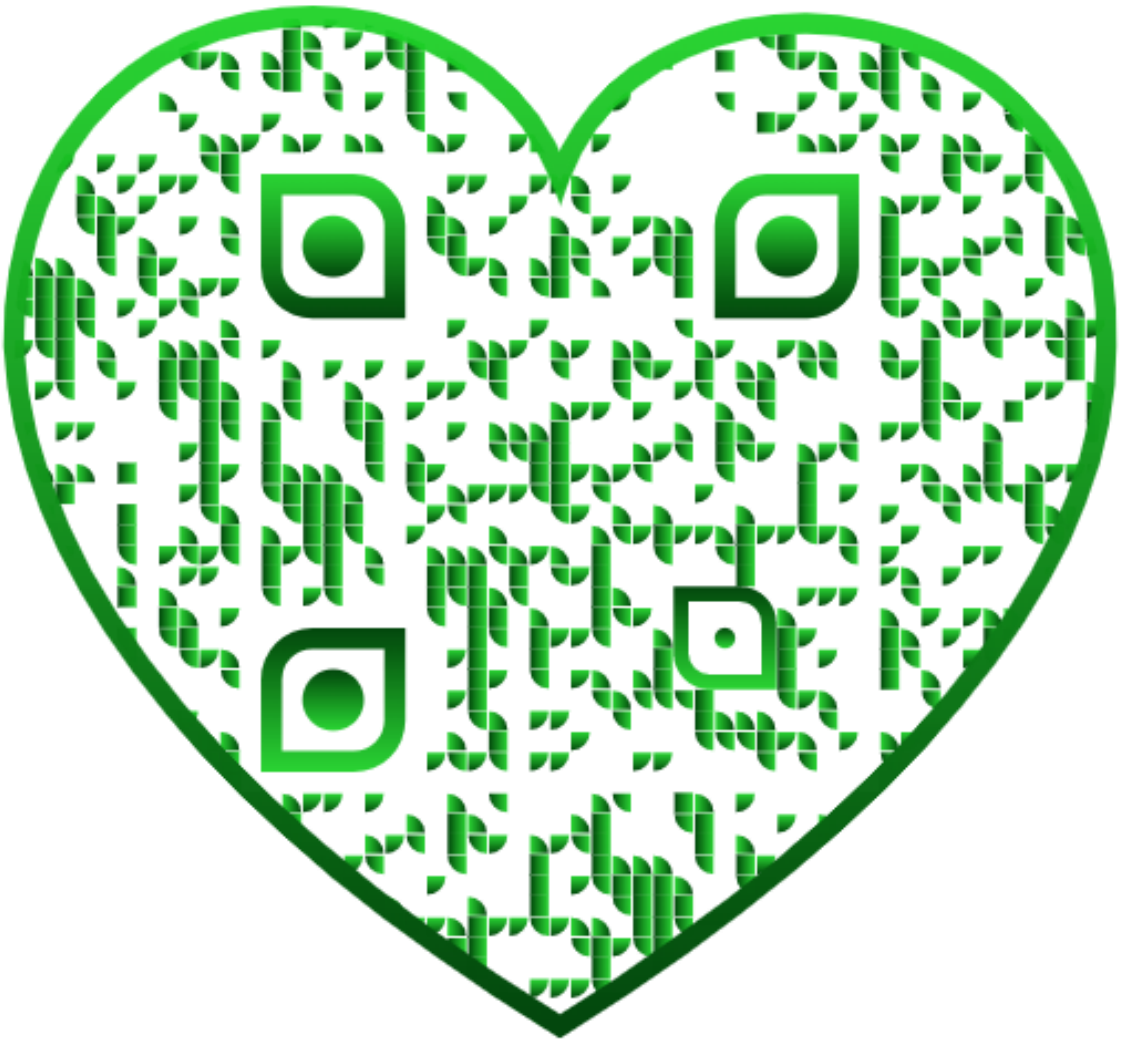

THE GHOSTS THAT HAUNT ME
MEMORIES OF A HOMICIDE DETECTIVE
Steve Ryan
CP24 CRIME SPECIALIST



THE GHOSTS THAT HAUNT ME

MEMORIES OF A HOMICIDE DETECTIVE

Steve Ryan

DUNDURN PRESS

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Foreword

TIMES CHANGE, BUT CRIME SCENES DON'T.

There's a coroner on scene. A grieving family, too. You'll often see blood, markers next to shell casings, emergency vehicles, television cameras, and yellow police tape.

For more than three decades in the Greater Toronto Area, another constant at such scenes has been Steve Ryan. Reporters who cover tragedies would see Steve behind that yellow tape talking to a young cop or a witness and surveying every inch of what was in front of him and behind him.

As a detective, he always took a gumshoe approach. The more time at the scene, the more time talking to witnesses, the stronger the case when it got to a courtroom. This cop was all about solving crimes and putting away those who committed them. If it meant partaking in a long stakeout, so be it.

"We never forget the victims of crime," Ryan would tell reporters. "We do everything we can to get justice for them and their families."

The technology might have changed, but when you go to a crime scene, one thing that remains the same is you'll see Steve Ryan. But now he's on the other side of the yellow tape.

When Ryan hung up his Toronto Police Service badge and gun, he replaced it with a microphone and camera as a reporter and crime specialist for CP24. However, he's still all cop, all the time. While covering a crime or tragedy as a media member, he can't help but be there to help solve it.

Once a detective, always a detective. It's an edge reporters who haven't been police officers don't have. However, when you get to know this man off screen, it's clear that what drives him isn't just the quest to solve a riddle or break a story but to honour the victims. The human aspect of the harsh realities of this world

followed Ryan from his years in Toronto Police's Homicide unit to the street as a television personality. Every case seems personal to him.

The Ghosts That Haunt Me highlights six of Ryan's police cases and reveals a man who from an early age was driven to serve and protect. He always had the respect of the reporters, but in covering some of these cases as a reporter myself, what I didn't realize was the personal toll it took on him. When he writes about cases such as the brutal murders of Holly Jones, Stefanie Rengel, and Dr. Elana Fric-Shamji, he brings the reader inside both the investigations and the personal turmoil that went with them.

Ryan's vulnerability is on full display. This fascinating book goes a long way to explain something about this fine man who could be golfing instead of being around body bags and bullet holes.

However, Ryan knows that on the golf course he can't help families in need or assist the community in dealing with the ugly side of life. But still, whenever I see him out there shivering in his car in the heart of winter, I can't help but wonder why. This very personal memoir delves into that very question while paying tribute to the victims he doesn't want the world to forget.

Some things never change.

Joe Warmington
Reporter and Columnist, *Toronto Sun*

Preface

AS I WROTE THIS BOOK and looked back on a thirty-year career and more than fifty years of life, I realized something: I feel most defined by my career as a homicide detective. Sure, I've been involved in other things in my professional and personal lives and have gone by other titles. But there's something about investigating homicides that weaves itself into the fabric of an identity. It's unlike anything else.

Homicide sticks to your skin. It follows you home when you arrive back from work late at night. It hangs in the air like a dark cloud, travelling with you wherever you go. You can't wash it away, can't sleep it off, can never erase it from your memory. There's no way to escape it, not even if you tried to — it's always there. Some days I wish that wasn't the case. I often wish I could forget about the deaths I've seen. I wish I could switch off the part of me that knows too much about the darkness lurking within my city. But that can never be. Even now after having moved on to a new career with Bell Media's news station CP24, I'll always be a homicide detective. No matter how much time passes, no matter what I do, or where I go, it's who I am.

Part of this permanent identity as an investigator is because of *them* — the victims whose deaths I had the privilege of investigating. I was involved in the investigations of more than 150 homicides in Toronto over the course of thirteen years. Each victim holds a firm place in my memory and lives on in my heart. I knew them in death unlike anyone had ever known them in life. I sifted through the remnants of what remained of them to discover their stories. I learned their secrets — those they dared never tell. I met their mourning friends and families and heard the stories of their lives in much happier times. My team of detectives, constables, and forensic analysts re-created what they did in the days to hours before their lives were taken from them. I often wished I'd known

them in life, beyond the shadow of sadness and mystery that eclipsed their existences. Unfortunately, when I met them, it was too late. They were merely memories of people who once were.

It's funny, or maybe sad, that I sometimes think I see them. I catch glimpses of faces of people I never met while they were living — someone smiling in a crowd downtown, a figure my mind makes up in the shadows. For a second, I think it could be one of them — the people I've gotten to know so well, like bumping into an old friend after years apart. But then I remember it can't be. They're gone. It's just my mind playing tricks on me, ensuring I never forget.

That's the thing about working in homicide — it haunts you well after the case has had its day in court and the guilty parties have been sentenced. The faces never disappear; the stories live on. As Toronto moves on after tragedy, like springtime after a long winter, new tenants move into a unit once roped off by police tape, flowers grow in a park in the grass where a body once lay in the cold, neighbours feel safe again, shedding their anxieties after fearing to walk alone at night.

I often wonder if I'll ever "move on." Could I pack up these memories and see Toronto as something other than a series of grim crime scenes? I dismiss this thought as soon as I think it; there's no closure sufficient enough to put those memories away. I suppose that's why I've written this book. It's a way to box up some of the darkest moments of my career and keep them somewhere safe — tucked between the pages that follow.

The stories to come aren't just stories; they're the retelling of real people's deaths. They aren't easy memories to recall, but I'd be lying if I said I don't think about them every day. These stories are a sample of some of the tragic cases I've been involved with. To write all the stories of all of the victims who have impacted me, I'd need an eternity. Nothing could ever make me forget; each one left a scar on my heart. I'm in no way unique — every cop who has worked for as long as I did has looked evil in the eyes. I'm merely in a position to tell my stories and share the ghosts that haunt me.

Be warned that what you're about to read is incredibly heavy and will bear a great weight on your soul. Each chapter tells a sad story of a victim or victims of a homicide I investigated. This book deals with sexual assault, murder, domestic abuse, and self-harm. If you're discomforted by any of these subjects, I suggest

you place this book back on the shelf and choose something more soothing instead. I wouldn't judge you for doing so.

1

Beginning My Career

IT WAS THE SUMMER OF 1977. The pavement hissed in the sunshine like the cymbals in Fleetwood Mac's "Dreams" over the staticky radio in my mother's kitchen. I was eight years old and on summer break from school in Etobicoke, a community just far enough away from downtown Toronto to feel quiet and calm on a weekday morning. Neighbours watered their lawns as the cool, damp scent of the lake floated in from the shore each morning. My mother fried up thick slices of bologna in a greased pan on the stove and sandwiched them between two pieces of white bread for breakfast. My brother and I sat at the kitchen table eager to gobble our food. The sooner breakfast was done, the sooner we could rush to the door, slide on our sneakers, and run outside into the fresh morning air.

We woke up in the summer mornings keen to spend our days outside — batting tennis balls against the brick walls of the apartment complex with the palms of our hands, turning over heavy rocks to see the pale bugs crawling underneath, lying in the long grass to stare at clouds as they floated above, pedalling our bikes around the neighbourhood until the shadows grew long in the hot afternoon as we glided beneath the patterns of shade and sunshine on the tree-lined streets. Summer days felt like an eternity of adventure as we raced about, exploring and finding healthy amounts of trouble to get ourselves into. It felt as if we'd be young forever.

Returning home for dinner at the end of the day, scraped, bruised, sunburnt, and bug-bitten, I stashed my bike as I always did behind our building before walking downstairs to the door of the small basement apartment my parents rented. The air inside was almost as hot and humid as outside. My mother stood, as she always did, over a hot pot at the stove, sweat beading on her brow

as she stirred our dinner with a wooden spoon. The radio hummed in the background beneath the sound of her chopping and the pots bubbling. Only when she went to sleep did she turn off the radio. It kept her company throughout the day while my father worked and my brother and I adventured.

Both of my parents were born and raised in St. John's, Newfoundland. They met in their early twenties, fell in love, and soon set off together to Ontario to seek work and new possibilities. Shortly after they settled in Toronto, I was born, followed by two more children: my brother, Jason, and my sister, Nicole. We were certainly a full-time job for my mother thanks to all the trouble we got into.

My father was employed at the sales desk of a trucking parts company as his day job. On evenings and weekends, he was the superintendent of our little apartment complex. When he finished work for the day, he would recline on our living room sofa to rest his aching back and turn on the nightly news. He would sit, as he always did, eyes locked on the television behind his thick-lensed glasses.

The news was always on in our house. I often crept into the living room to watch it with him, pretending I was old enough to understand what was going on, old enough for it to matter to me. It was a window outside our tiny apartment, a connection to other places farther away than my feet could pedal me to on my bicycle. That sort of connection — that feeling of being "tuned in" — was hard to attain before the advent of the internet. So many of us spent our lives quite literally unplugged. So one night, as I often did, I crawled up onto the couch next to my father, whose gaze was fixed unwaveringly on our television set, to watch the evening news alongside him.

That night a man with a moustache wearing a suit jacket appeared on the square screen before us. He spoke with an assertive voice, reciting headlines I've since forgotten. Usually, I didn't pay attention to what the anchor said. After all, I was only eight, and the concepts in a news report alien to me, unless it was about how the Toronto Blue Jays were doing. Then I was all ears.

But that evening something was different. Something startling was announced on the news that I still remember to this day.

I recall the anchor suddenly looking sombre. He stared sorrowfully at the camera before reading the next lines of his announcements. The words that followed hung heavy in the hot air: *The body of a young boy has been uncovered on*

a rooftop in downtown Toronto. The picture on the screen cut to a video of Yonge and Dundas Streets where the boy had been working shining shoes before he went missing a few days earlier, lured away by unidentified persons.

At the time, I had no true conception of death, but I knew it was scary. I knew that grandparents died, and so did pets. I knew that when things died they could never come back. I knew, most importantly, that children didn't *just die*. And certainly, twelve-year-old boys didn't just show up dead on a rooftop without explanation. Especially not in Toronto, somewhere everyone thought was a safe and pleasant place to live. I had never heard of such a terrible thing. To my knowledge at the time, nothing like this had happened in Toronto before. Of course, as an adult, I know this wasn't the first time a child had been taken and brutally murdered in the city. But back then it was a shock. It was something no one in my generation would ever forget — a sudden loss of innocence.

The boy on the rooftop, Emanuel Jaques, was just a few years older than me. His picture on the screen showed him gazing at the camera with big smiling eyes. I had photos like that of me taken in school on picture day, wearing a collared shirt with my hair swept to the side by my mother's careful hands. I realized then, studying Emanuel's face as it looked at me from our television, that *he was just like me, just like my little brother, just like my friends*. No one, when I was a boy, thought the streets of Toronto weren't safe enough for children to roam freely alone. Emanuel Jaques could have been any child that summer. I'd been running around in my lakeshore community unsupervised all afternoon for weeks, returning home only for dinnertime. We all wandered free back then. We all thought we were safe.

My mother had made her way into the living room and was standing behind us, arms crossed in the doorway, a dishtowel still draped over her shoulder as she observed the broadcast carefully in a way she usually didn't care to do. "Jesus," she whispered, shaking her head sadly.

I glanced at my father, usually rather stoic and unaffected by the grimness of the evening news. But he seemed stunned. We all stared straight ahead in silence, alarmed at the news of poor Emanuel Jaques. Who would have thought this could happen?

My mother broke the quiet that had settled over us by suddenly announcing, "Dinner's ready," before turning back toward the kitchen. I swore I saw a tear in her eye as she hurried from the living room. My father got up numbly and flicked off the TV set, the image of the news anchor who had moved on to sports flickering to black. I rushed to my supper.

That night, my typically loud and cheerful Newfoundlander parents ate in silence at the dinner table. I was silent, too, mulling over what it meant for a boy's dead body to be found on a rooftop. Who could have done this and why would anyone want to hurt a little boy? It was on all our minds. In the days to come, it would feel as if a dark shroud had been placed over the entire city. Parents held on to their children tighter, we kept closer to home when we went outside, and Emanuel's smiling face was plastered on every front page in the city, watching all of us with haunting irony. Everyone in Toronto held their breath, fearing another child would disappear. No one knew who had killed him. It could have been anyone's neighbour, anyone's friend.

Toronto had lost its innocence. The sense of security we had as children playing in the park alone, as parents who felt their neighbourhood streets were safe enough for their children, was shattered into a million pieces. Never again would anyone say, "Oh, that sort of stuff doesn't happen where we live." Because now it had. We soon learned how Emanuel Jaques ended up on that rooftop. He was abducted, sexually assaulted, and then murdered. Four men were charged with his homicide. One pled guilty, two were found guilty at trial, and the fourth was acquitted.

For many nights after Emanuel's body was discovered, I lay in my bed in the room I shared with my little brother, Jason, listening to the sounds of the city outside our bedroom window. A city that was once so familiar to me, now entirely unknown, and scarily strange. The shadows in the darkness seemed more menacing, the distant sirens wailed more earnestly than before, the silence in the aftermath felt more eerie as if something would come along and make a startling bang at any moment. I suppose I was young and scared, so small both in stature and in the grand scheme of the world — there was nothing I could do to stop that reaction. I often thought about Emanuel, wondered if we would have been friends had we ever met, speculated if he, too, liked to watch the Blue Jays play baseball, had a bike to ride through his neighbourhood. It was there,

alone in the startling quiet but for the sound of my brother's soft snoring in the bed beside mine, that I resolved I wanted to help people like Emanuel.

I wasn't quite sure what the job was exactly, or if it even was a job. I figured that out many years down the road, but at the time, just simply knew that what happened to Emanuel wasn't fair, wasn't right. And if there were ever others like him, I wanted to help rebalance the scales that had been tipped so wildly, so inequitably.

I had no way of knowing then, as a boy in my bedroom on a summer's night in 1977, that there would be many others like Emanuel Jaques in the years to come. Nor did I know I would come to meet many of those others like him in my professional life, nearly twenty-five years into the future. That night, however, oblivious to my future career or the sad and untimely deaths of the people I would investigate, I buried my face in my soft pillow and drifted off to sleep.

Years passed from that day in 1977. But I never forgot; no one did. The whole city changed after Emanuel's death. I grew up and entered my teenage years, a passage of time that Emanuel never got to experience.

In what felt like the blink of an eye, I was eighteen years old, waking up to my alarm clock blaring at me as my house buzzed with morning chaos. My father had already begun hollering for us to get up as he paced around tying his tie and spraying his cologne. He was still working at the trucking company but was now a sales manager. While my father got ready for work, my mother made breakfast in the kitchen downstairs as my siblings and I competed for time in the washroom to get ready for school before rushing out the door. It was a frustrating battle each morning.

In high school, I was restless; most people are at that point in their lives. I attended Michael Power - St. Joseph High School in Etobicoke, where each day I tied my tie and buttoned my blue uniform blazer with listlessness. There were five years of high school then, which dragged on for what seemed like an eternity. I was eighteen years old and still being told what to do by my high school teachers. I felt too old to be there but still too young to know what to do with my life. I'd sit at my desk, my school uniform growing increasingly uncomfortable, as I watched the seconds tick down on a large clock over my

classroom door, each tick nearer to the final bell of the day. I couldn't wait to leave class, hop in my car, and cruise back home. It would be even better, I fantasized, when I got to leave school for good. The sound of the last bell *ever* would sound so sweet to my ears. But, of course, graduating from high school implied a future existence. The thought of what came after a life that was, thus far, spent entirely in the confines of a school was equally as scary as it was exciting. *What was I going to do next?* It was a question my father had been asking me with increasing frequency and was now on the forefront of my mind. As the months counted down to my graduation day, it was all I could think about.

Leaving school felt like marching off a track I'd been following for years into the brush without a map. I had applied to a number of universities in the province, but it just didn't feel like the path I was supposed to be on. Nothing really did. Looking back, I understand that's normal. Rarely do young people know precisely what they want to be or who they want to be from the time they're eighteen years old. But then it felt like such an overwhelming dilemma. I hated that I thought about it all the time.

It wasn't until a career day in the fall semester of grade thirteen that I figured it out, or rather, stumbled upon it. Career days were meant to help us organize our lives, but they often left me more confused than before I attended them. I entered the crowded school gymnasium to see booths of employers set up in rows, handing out pamphlets to students. I remember drifting from booth to booth aimlessly, half expecting never to find a career that interested me, in the melodramatic way teenagers so often think. I recall, after some time had passed, looking down at my hands and realizing the extreme volume of pamphlets I'd accumulated absentmindedly as they were passed to me — a stack of papers at least three inches thick.

I figured I should study them to see if anything piqued my interest. After all, I was on a quest to determine *my* path in life. But shuffling through a few of the pamphlets sparked no excitement or intrigue. On the contrary, the careers presented in the pamphlets before me filled me with dread. Nothing was enticing. The prospect of doing any of those careers for the next forty years made me shudder. I thought, *Even with a stack of papers this thick you can't find a job you want to do*. I was on my way to the trash bin to pessimistically throw the

pamphlets away, vowing never to attend another career day again, when I glanced down once more at what was in my hands. I realized the one now sitting on top of my stack, after I'd shuffled them, was an advertisement to join the Metropolitan Toronto Police's cadet program. *A career in policing.*

My mind immediately hurtled back to Emanuel Jaques and my boyhood desire to help people like him when I was grown up. As cheesy as it might sound, staring at that pamphlet in my hands in the middle of my school gymnasium, I suddenly felt as if I'd found a path for myself. I was only a teenager, I really knew nothing about policing at that point, but I felt a strange pull, like a magnetic force, drawing me to apply, as if suddenly I'd found the place where I was going to belong. My mind was made up in the definitive way teenagers do so based on no logic, created on nothing but a feeling.

I threw the rest of the pamphlets in the trash as I strode out of the gymnasium that day. When I returned home, I pinned the cadet advertisement on my parents' refrigerator. I was going to apply to the Toronto Police. I was going to be a *detective*. I was going to fulfill the mission I'd set for myself as a boy. I was going to help people.

Little did I realize then that the road to my dream career would be long. There would be lots of studying and tests involved in my training before I ever conducted an interview or made an arrest. From my eager teenage years to my first day in Homicide, there would be a nearly fifteen-year span, and I would do many different things as a police officer in that time.

But that night, sitting at the dinner table with my family gazing at the pamphlet I'd pinned so proudly on the fridge, I didn't think about all that. I felt a conviction to this career and that I'd suddenly found a purpose. I dreamed about my future job — the excitement of it, the people I thought I could help. Not once did the tragedy I'd encounter cross my mind, nor did it occur to me that I'd meet people so heartbroken and forlorn that no amount of detective work in the world could make them feel helped ever again. Perhaps it was best that I didn't know all of that then; perhaps it would have scared a younger me off the career he would eventually devote his life to. No one can ever truly be prepared for the stressors and traumas of working a homicide investigation.

• • •

I applied to the Toronto Police's cadet program as soon as I could and was hired to start in the spring of my grade thirteen year. I was so motivated to begin before my school's June graduation that I worked extra time at nights to finish my high school diploma early. I even skipped graduation and got the diploma in the mail.

The cadet program was a sort of police "apprenticeship," a place to learn the ropes of policework until you were twenty-one years old and could be hired by the Toronto Police, according to its age policies at the time. There were about thirty of us in total in the program, ranging from eighteen to twenty years old, all eager to start our future careers in policing.

I remember my first day vividly, getting ready in the morning in the narrow bathroom upstairs at my parents' townhome in Etobicoke — we had moved out of the apartment by then. I made sure my face was clean-shaven, hair cropped and neat, boots shined a thousand times.

When I walked into Charles O. Bick Police College, I had a knot of nerves in my stomach. Visually, the place wasn't all that different from the high school I'd just left. Through the front doors on my right was a large gymnasium with various mats and obstacle courses set up, as well as ropes to climb to the ceiling. Farther into the school, there was a cafeteria for breakfast and lunch and an impressive staircase that led from the front lobby to the classrooms upstairs. The place emanated an atmosphere of structure and consistency. The floors were polished, the windows sparkled, and even papers were stacked on desks in crisp piles with edges and corners lining up perfectly. It was truly an excellent atmosphere to learn in. And did I ever learn!

The early weeks as a cadet were dedicated strictly to time in the classrooms. I spent hours listening to lectures, diligently scribbling notes on provincial law and Toronto bylaws. Midway through each day, I changed into sweats in the locker room for classes in self-defence and physical fitness.

Every night I'd return home exhausted, physically and mentally. Something changed in me when I became a cadet. Looking back, I think it was that I'd matured. I had never felt as if I wanted to do a good job like this before. As a kid, I'd slacked off as much as possible. But this was different. I cared about my job. So I worked hard and studied my notes every evening by lamplight in the bedroom I still shared with my little brother, Jason, now a freshman in high

school. I jogged around my neighbourhood each weekend, improving my fitness levels for the tests we had to take, determined to improve myself and committed to being the best version of *me* I could be.

Soon my class had learned enough to move out to the streets of Toronto and commence *working*. I spent my days outside riding a motorcycle around the city, serving summonses and handing out parking tickets in a cadet uniform. In a way, I felt like I did as a child, riding my bicycle in the summer heat on the streets that branched off Lake Shore Boulevard, the wind whipping against me as I revved my bike's engine. I was completely free and excited for what each day would bring me. Every day was different, every day was exciting. From the taste I had of policing, I couldn't wait until I could do more, until I left the cadet program and became a real police officer.

I was a cadet for three years, patiently awaiting my twenty-first birthday when I could be hired as a police officer. I often crossed paths with cadet classmates older than I was when they joined the program, who had been hired and had already begun working as police officers full-time. I looked at them partly with admiration, partly with envy. I wanted to do *real* police work like they were doing.

Reflecting back, I was far too eager. Such is the nature of being so young. Rather than enjoying youth, we so often fight against it, always wishing to be older, for more time to pass so we can move on to the next chapter. If I could speak to my younger self, I'd tell him to slow down, enjoy those motorcycle rides along the lake catching glints of the sunsets off Lake Ontario's soft waves. Soon enough, I'd be a police officer with responsibilities far greater than those I faced as a cadet. But back then I was just longing for time to go faster and didn't savour a second of it. Each year as I blew out my birthday candles, I knew I was getting closer and closer to my hiring day. The wait was long, but at least I liked what I was doing in the meantime.

My twenty-first birthday came and went … and so did my twenty-fifth, my thirtieth, my thirty-third. Soon I'd been working for the Toronto Police for more than a decade. I would look back on the days doing cadet work fondly, despite the time I spent wishing I could speed everything up. Things were

simpler then. The work was clear-cut. Such illusions of police work would be dispelled in the years that followed.

You see another side of humanity in policing, learn who people are when all their inhibitions are gone, when they just don't care anymore. There's a crudeness to all of us that we put away to live in society in harmony together. But at a crime scene all the pomp and pleasantries of human social norms disappear. People show you who they truly are underneath it all.

I once thought policing was helping people. Perhaps in a way I still believe that but now realize that after spending a long career doing police work, it's a lot more complicated. Yes, in many cases a police officer showing up at a scene can save the day, but for the most part, by the time the police arrive, it's already too late. The police aren't a bandage that can be placed over any and all problems — not like a superhero flying to the rescue. Usually, when I was dispatched somewhere, something terrible had already happened. Someone was already dead, someone was already hurt, someone was already threatened. I couldn't undo the wrongs that had been done. All I was there to do was clean up the aftermath, however messy it was. I could lay a charge, make an arrest, and send someone away in the back of a police car. But in reality, that's the equivalent of putting a bandage on a festering wound. The problems that caused the situations I policed ran so much deeper. There's a sadness you feel when policing — the sorrow that you can't do anything more.

I remember one of the moments when I first realized that I was responding to the aftermath of problems I had no way of fixing. New to policing, probably only twenty-four years old, I was a uniformed officer patrolling 21 Division — now called 22 Division — in my car near Lake Ontario. The moon was bright in the night sky and everything was quiet. I hadn't seen a car drive by in quite a while when I was radioed to do a "check address" — a man had called the police, concerned he hadn't seen his downstairs neighbour in a number of days. He said it wasn't like her to stay shut indoors. She lived on the bottom floor while he resided on the top of a house in a lakeside section of Etobicoke. I drove down through the borough to get to their address, passing beautiful homes with well-manicured front lawns shrouded by the blackness of night. Pulling up to the house, I shut off the engine, got out my car, and walked down a pathway to the home's front door.

Previously, I had done a few such calls — knocking on doors to make sure loved ones were safe after they hadn't been heard from in a while. Typically, the loved one would open the door and assure me that everything was all right, that she had merely forgotten to call relatives or friends. But this time it was different. I rapped on the front door, but no one responded. Glancing at the driveway, I saw a parked vehicle, so I knocked again. Something felt strange. When verifying people's safety, it's permissible to gain entrance to a home to ensure they're okay. Sometimes they have accidents and are unable to walk to the door; other times they're unconscious.

I was patrolling alone that night; the officer who was supposed to meet me still hadn't arrived. Against safety protocol, which mandated we respond in pairs, I decided to contact the woman's upstairs neighbour, the man who had called about her seeming disappearance. I should have waited for my partner to show up before engaging with anyone on the scene, but I had a terrible feeling. I was young, and stupid, so I opted to investigate rather than delay.

The neighbour who had called informed me that he had a key to the woman's home and unlocked her door. While he waited outside, I entered and clicked on my flashlight, playing its beam from wall to wall as I called out the woman's name. Moving through the front hallway, I continued to shout her name but got no response. When I reached the kitchen, there was still no sign of her or anyone else in the apartment. The lights were off and the place was eerily silent. All I heard was the low hum of the refrigerator and the thud of my own boots on the floor.

Then I came to the bedroom and saw it.

The bedroom curtains were open and moonlight spilled in, illuminating the bed where a woman lay perfectly still. Her skin was pale, almost glowing white in the darkness. She wore a blue floral dress, stockings, and high heels. Her manicured hands were folded neatly on top of her stomach. Fastened with elastic bands around her head and tied to her neck was a plastic bag that obscured her face. Beside her on a nightstand was a bottle of sedatives and an empty bottle of liquor. My heart sank.

Of course, when I found her, it was too late. I could tell she had passed some time ago. She looked peaceful. I wished someone had called earlier, that someone had thought to check on her before it was too late. She was the first

person on the job who truly made me feel helpless. I couldn't do anything to save her, to make her better. The woman had departed this world long before I'd arrived.

That scene and others like it that I attended in uniform still come back to me in vivid, fragmented memories: police lights strobing against a car wreck in the dead of night, no signs of life inside the shattered vehicle; children crying barefoot in a moonlit yard as their parents quarrel viciously inside; witnesses shaking in shock, tears streaming down their faces as they recall something they'll never forget. And then there are the guns, blood, tears, and violence. As a police officer, I could only do so much to remedy a situation — the damage had already been irreparably done.

That's not to sell the job or the work my colleagues and I did short. Policing is hard work, and I know for certain that police officers help a lot of people in their darkest hours. But I also know the help police can provide has its limitations. I know in homicide I helped … in a way. I helped victims and their families gain closure. I helped take dangerous people off the streets who would otherwise be roaming free to hurt someone else again. But still the fact remains: my work was a poor remedy for the alternative — the crime never happening in the first place.

Years passed and I moved out of uniform. I was soon a young detective working at headquarters in Sex Crimes. I wasn't working there for very long before another child abduction rocked Toronto like an earthquake, once again changing the city forever.

2

Holly Jones: Tragedy in The Junction

IT WAS MAY 2003. THE trees were budding, the birds still making their arrivals back to the city after a long winter away. The city was reawakening.

Toronto winters can so often feel like an eternity of ice and cold. Springtime is a much-needed dose of optimism woven back into the fabric of the city. People, too, seem to awake from their winter slumbers, the parks become busier, recreational cyclists wheel their bikes out of their garages, restaurants open their patios and patrons sit with faces like sunflowers soaking in the sunshine that lengthens daylight minute by minute each day.

In early May that year, I recall in particular driving home from an overnight call. I was working as a detective in the Sex Crimes unit then, investigating sexual assaults in Toronto. It was a hard job. Unlike in Homicide, the survivors of sexual assaults are there to recount their stories to investigators. I couldn't imagine the impact such crimes had on survivors but could see the pain in their eyes and hear it in their words as I interviewed them. Nor could I conceive how invasive the process of sexual assault investigations must feel to them. First, every inch of their bodies was examined by medical doctors at Women's College Hospital. Then they went to Toronto Police Headquarters at 40 College Street to tell detectives their stories, reliving the incidents where their consent was violated — a moment I'm sure they wanted to bury deep and never again remember.

"I wish he would've killed me so it would've been over," one survivor once said to me during an investigation. Such pain to wish yourself dead is unfathomable. I met true monsters working in Sex Crimes, but I also

encountered the resiliency and bravery of victims who spoke out against their attackers.

Work was on my mind as I drove the long way back home. It always was. While I was heading out of Toronto, most other people were making their morning commute into the city for work. As I drove past farm fields and pastures, the early morning drizzle slowed. It was common for the first days of May in southern Ontario to be chilly and rainy. A vast expanse of clouds still hung in the grey sky, assuring me the rain would soon be back. I squinted at the umbrella that rested in the seat beside me.

After driving for what seemed like hours, I pulled into the driveway of the house where I now lived with my wife and children. Making my way through the garage and inside the house, I dropped my keys on the kitchen counter. I was so very tired. A sort of tired I can't fully describe in words — every muscle in my body ached for rest.

Anyone who does shift work can tell you how out of step it makes you feel with the rest of the world, as if you're existing on a different plane, awake all night, asleep during the day. Vampiric almost, not only because of the nocturnal schedule but also because working all night makes you feel like a walking corpse eager to crawl back into its grave. As a younger man, I could work overnight without feeling any effects whatsoever. I could work overnight and go for a long run in the morning. But as I got older, late nights became more and more difficult. Indeed, work all night past the age of thirty was a strain on my entire physiology. Each time I woke up I felt as though I had aged a hundred years. My bones were creakier, my eyelids felt as though they were made of sandpaper, my skin appeared as though it had lost all its vibrancy. Yes, night shifts are, for lack of a better term, the worst. I would often dream of how nice it would be when I no longer had to work such strange hours, but for as long as I was in police work, I would be doing nights.

On my typical return home from work after a day shift, my family would be home. They'd come and greet me as I entered the door, the house would bustle with the energy of my two young children, we'd eat dinner as a family, go to bed, and wake up *on the same schedule*. It was great to feel in step with the rest of my family. In no way was it convenient to work nights. By the time I got home in the morning following a night shift, everyone had already left for their days at

work and school. I entered a house without any occupants. Just me and my thoughts to keep me company, acutely aware of the time my family had spent without me, the moments I could never get back away from them, as I stood in an empty kitchen. Such is the struggle of anyone who does shift work. Sometimes you go entire days without seeing the people you love most. Until they returned home, I was alone in the silence, rummaging through cabinets to find something quick to eat for breakfast before drawing the bedroom curtains and tucking myself in for a long nap.

Opening the refrigerator door, I picked at leftovers of the dinner I'd missed the night before, straight from the Tupperware container that sat on a shelf. I was so hungry I didn't even bother to put the food on a plate. As I stood in front of the fridge eating food like a raccoon digging through a garbage can, I heard the *buzz-buzz* of my pager coming from the counter where it sat next to my car keys. A notification to call into work.

Getting a notification on my pager was never good news. As a detective working in Sex Crimes, being paged into work usually meant someone had been sexually assaulted and there was a case to investigate.

I blinked the sleep from my eyes as I called the office from the telephone mounted on the wall in the kitchen. Each ring felt as though it lasted a thousand years. Already I started imagining what terrible thing had occurred and who it had happened to. I conjured up the worst scenarios in my head, reliving all the awful things I'd seen looking into sexual assaults over the years. Even the worst of my imagination couldn't prepare me for the reality that would soon be revealed.

Someone picked up on the other end of the line: *Ten-year-old Holly Jones went missing last night. She hasn't been found*.

It's unusual for a child to go missing and for neither parent to be involved in the abduction. Often one parent grabs a child to hide him or her from a partner. But that wasn't the case with Holly Jones. The detectives investigating her case immediately recognized her disappearance was different.

Neither of Holly's parents knew where she was. On the night she vanished, they sat expectantly in their home in The Junction, a neighbourhood in Toronto's west end that felt like a village within the greater city. It was largely occupied by young families residing in early and mid-twentieth-century

semidetached houses built along pleasant tree-lined streets. The parks in the neighbourhood were filled with the giggles and squeals of their children. The Joneses were one of those families who believed The Junction was a safe and respectable environment to raise kids.

The night Holly went missing, her parents waited anxiously for her to come home. The last time they'd seen her she was headed out their front door to walk a friend home after an after-school playdate.

Perhaps she got caught up playing or was invited in for a drink, I'm sure they thought to themselves. Ten-year-olds can be absent-minded, so perhaps she'd forgotten to call to check in. But her friend only lived a few blocks away; she should have been home sooner. Daylight slowly faded with no sign of Holly. *Had she gotten lost? This was her first time walking home by herself, maybe she took a wrong turn, went down the wrong street.* But Holly had grown up in the city her entire life. She frequently strolled through the neighbourhood with her parents; she knew her way around. So, as night crept in, her parents called the police.

Holly never made it home. It was as if she'd vanished into thin air. Nobody could find a trace of her on that stretch of road between the Joneses' house and the home of Holly's friend — not a shoe, not an article of clothing, nothing. Nor could any of the Joneses' neighbours say they'd spotted her.

When a child goes missing like that in Toronto, a special abductions protocol is implemented. According to the protocol, both Sex Crimes and Homicide units set up a case jointly even before any confirmation of death or sexual assault. The two units investigate the abduction together. They establish a command centre for the case that consists of one detective sergeant and two detectives from each unit, as well as constables from the local division. The investigation proceeds jointly until the child is found.

I was one of the detectives from Sex Crimes called in to work on Holly's case. I was to report immediately to my detective sergeant, the lead for my unit, at the command centre at 12 Division on Trethewey Drive in North York.

So I picked up my keys again and headed out the door. The rainy sky had cleared a little bit, but it was still overcast. A sunny day would have felt wrong given the circumstances.

I started my car's engine and backed out of the driveway, barely an hour after I'd pulled in. Holly was in my thoughts on the drive into headquarters,

hoping the entire time she'd be found safely.

It soon became clear that Holly wouldn't be recovered alive. Two bags washed up on Ward's Island just off Toronto's mainland. An island resident walking his dog in the early morning spotted the unusual items. The beach's sandy shoreline is typically clear of refuse, so he pulled his dog closer to get a better look. Inside the bags were human remains, later confirmed to be pieces of the ten-year-old.

The investigative team was now searching for a murderer.

Our team was led by Detective Sergeant Dave Perry and Detective Sergeant Ken Taylor. Perry, a sturdy, stern man with cropped brown hair, was a homicide cop who had transferred to Sex Crimes. Taylor was a muscular homicide detective with silver hair that he wore gelled back. He was used to the gloom that accompanied murder investigations, yet could always be counted on to keep a team optimistic no matter what the circumstances. Under Perry and Taylor worked a number of detectives and constables — and me.

I had never been involved in a homicide investigation before in a detective's role. As a novice, I watched as my seniors planned and strategized. It was my job to follow their leads and hunt down tips they deemed promising.

Every morning the detectives walked into the command centre to meet Perry and Taylor around a large table to discuss leads and get new orders.

"What do you have today?" either Perry or Taylor would ask us.

Each of us then took turns giving them updates on what we had done the previous day. After each of us did that, one of the detective sergeants would respond with "Write a report to clear the tip" or "Dig deeper."

When the briefing was finished, Perry and Taylor sent us out with lists of leads to trace, potential witnesses to track down, or possible crime scene locations to visit. Unfortunately, there wasn't much to work with. I ran all over the city with my partner hunting down leads, but each one was a dead end.

Random crimes are the hardest to solve. I would come to appreciate that even more when I was a homicide detective. In a crime committed based on circumstance alone, there's nothing in the victim's life that could possibly point to the assailant. Usually, when someone goes missing or is murdered or assaulted, he or she knows the perpetrator. It isn't hard to trace through the web of a victim's network to discover who had motive or opportunity to hurt her or

him. Holly's murder was looking more and more like a random occurrence — no one close to her could have been a suspect. Without any history between the victim and her attacker, it made the investigation extraordinarily difficult.

As a detective, you rely heavily on the community for tips in investigations such as these — little pieces of information that can steer you down the right path in an otherwise treacherous labyrinth. At first it can feel hopeless, like sorting through a haystack to find that single needle. But one hopeful truth I've always clung to in investigations such as these is that *someone* always sees *something*. It's just a matter of time before information comes through a tip line.

Holly's death affected the whole city, just as Emanuel Jaques's had almost thirty years earlier, like all child abductions do. A child cruelly snatched from life by a stranger makes everybody stop, think, and suspect. Everyone believed they might know who had taken Holly. Parents and children were more mindful, watching warily for adults lingering too near their playgrounds, peering out curtains at neighbours leaving homes at odd hours in the morning, monitoring new faces in every neighbourhood in Toronto. It wasn't just the police anymore. The whole city was on the hunt for someone, but nobody really knew who. A collective culture of suspicion arose, and tips poured in.

I was dispatched with colleagues by my commanding officers to search for witnesses and gather information from the communities on the Toronto Islands. I remembered my trips there as a kid. My parents would take me to an amusement park on Centre Island in the summers of my childhood. I have faint memories of riding on the carousel, an ice-cream cone in one hand dripping in the heat, the wooden horses bobbing up and down, my parents waving to me as I passed with each revolution. The islands have always been a peaceful place for me, as they are for all Torontonians — somewhere to escape the hustle and bustle of the city and pretend, for a moment, they're somewhere far away.

That day, I stepped off the Marine unit's boat and into the quaint, picturesque community on Ward's Island with a team of detectives and constables. Usually, a trip to the islands transported me to another time and place — a world without cars, without condominiums and office buildings that stretched to the sky. Today, though, my colleagues and I had a grim task to perform as we fanned out to do our interviews.

Ward's Island was cast in a grey haze. Fog hung thick in the air, and I could barely see a few feet in front of me. Lake Ontario's icy waves crashed ominously against the docks. The whole place seemed like a ghost town. Not even seagulls dared to squawk.

Under any other circumstances, Ward's Island would be considered idyllic. The community was comprised of small, single-storey, cottage-like homes, the sort you might picture when reading a story about Goldilocks or Jack and the Beanstalk. Each home was unique. Some were painted blue, others red, some green. They sat side by side with square front yards featuring lots of grass. Many had little gardens with whimsical-looking tulips starting to sprout. Each house was connected to its neighbour by a narrow footpath, the way homes elsewhere are linked by roads. On a typical spring or summer day on Ward's Island, you might see community members tending to their gardens, riding their bikes happily in the sunshine, enjoying a sort of nature so rare to come by in the city.

That morning, however, the island seemed sinister as I strode along the footpaths in the damp air, the tails of my overcoat trailing behind me. I didn't see a single soul as I made my way deeper and deeper into the little community, squinting through the soupy fog before me. While the streets were empty and the atmosphere silent, I could feel eyes watching me, people gazing out their windows nervously at the detective who would soon be knocking on their doors. They thought a killer lived among them, that someone on Ward's had killed Holly Jones.

"Spooky, eh?" one of the constables said to me as we threaded through the footpaths between the tiny cottages.

"Don't be silly," I replied.

But I couldn't lie to myself. He was right, and I wondered, *Is the killer here, watching us out his window like the rest of his neighbours?* A chill ran up my spine as I scanned every misty front yard, noticing silhouettes in most windows as I passed, people staring warily, fearfully.

Ward's Island is far removed from the comforts of mainland Toronto. Grocery stores, doctors' offices, electricians, and plumbers are all a boat ride away. Thus, the community is tightly knit and resourceful, sharing goods, lending skills to their neighbours when necessary. The island's residents rely on one another to get by each day, so I could imagine the sense of betrayal they

must have felt thinking one of their neighbours, maybe a friend, had killed Holly.

We knocked on door after door that day. The residents did and said the same thing, standing in open doorways, crossing arms to keep warm as the morning chill seeped inside, regarding us with sympathetic eyes, mouths pursed in firm lines while shaking their heads sadly. *What a shame*, they'd say. *It's the last place you'd expect such a thing to happen*. Finally, they'd look at us regrettably and add, *I'm sorry, but I didn't see anything*.

As it turned out, the man we were searching for didn't live on Ward's Island. No dark secrets were hidden within those fairy-tale cottages lined up row after row.

The bags that had washed up on the islands had been carried away from the lakeshore on the mainland. Whether through dumb luck or divine intervention, Holly's remains didn't sink. They moved with the current of the lake out to the shores of Ward's Island to be found by a passerby.

Since that day, I've never been back to the islands. It remains one of the many places in Toronto I can't bring myself to visit after investigating a homicide there. For me, no matter how blue the sky, no matter how warm the sunshine, the Toronto Islands could never again be a place of happiness. To me, the place will always look as it did that foggy day in May 2003, the way it did as I stood, leather shoes in the sand, watching the waves lap the shoreline where merely days earlier Holly's remains had been discovered.

The pieces of evidence found with and on Holly's body parts in the bags that washed up on Ward's Island were crucial to our investigation: dumbbells used unsuccessfully to weigh her remains down, green carpet fibres, a remnant of the last place her body might have been. And, most importantly, male DNA, that of her attacker, under her fingernails.

Holly's remains were sent to the city morgue, at that time located across the street from police headquarters, just north of College Street. Once they had arrived at the facility, a thorough autopsy was conducted, ensuring that every piece of evidence left on her body was noted and sent for analysis. Her fingernails were carefully clipped, bagged, and delivered to the Centre of Forensic Sciences, then on Grosvenor Street. There, the forensic scientists

analyzed any material found under her nails. If she had scratched someone in a struggle prior to her death, for example, the DNA of her assailant, from his skin cells or blood, might be detected there. This DNA could be preserved for comparison to that of suspects in the future and then referenced against a databank of known DNA samples. DNA evidence makes investigations much more accurate than they were in the past. Speculation is unnecessary when science can point detectives in the right direction. We were fortunate that DNA was recovered in this case; it became crucial to finding out who murdered Holly.

However, at the time, even with possible DNA evidence, there was very little to go on for my supervising officers to build Holly's case. There were about two and a half million people in Toronto and an equal number to that in the Greater Toronto Area at the time, presumably half of them male and each with his own unique genetic code. Probably all of them had access to dumbbells, and who knew how many households were outfitted with green carpet. All the evidence, DNA included, was useless to us without a suspect. The investigating team still knew just as little as we understood before: Holly had walked home, vanished, and not a single witness had seen what had happened to her.

So I continued following up on tips the lead investigators gave me. Any one of them could have steered us to the person who had killed Holly. Most of them, though, didn't.

"My neighbour has been acting *strange* lately," complained one elderly woman to me, peering suspiciously across her front lawn at the house next door.

"What do you mean by *strange*?" I asked, scribbling in my notebook as she recounted the man's behaviour.

"Well, he's only been leaving the house at night. I've been watching him through my window."

"Is leaving the house at night something new for him that you've noticed?" I prodded her hopefully.

She thought for a moment. "I suppose not … but he makes such a racket slamming his door when he leaves."

My hope disappeared.

As silly as it might sound, every tip had to be thoroughly checked. So it was my job to make sure the aforementioned woman's neighbour had an alibi in

order to rule him out or not as a suspect. We couldn't risk having Holly's murderer go unnoticed because we thought a tip seemed silly.

Then, of course, there was an uptick in the number of calls into police divisions and the tip line about suspicious, unattended bags. After what was found on the Toronto Islands, no one in the city could look at a lost gym bag or stray trash bag the same way again. I attended the scene of one such peculiar bag sitting alone in a park. Showing up where it was located and crossing the police tape that kept the bag a safe distance from the public, I assessed whether it, too, held human remains. Upon inspecting it, I thankfully discovered it only contained a pair of socks.

The investigation proceeded like that for a while: neighbours calling us to investigate neighbours, friends no longer trusting friends. I had to do due diligence and rule each tip out, such was the nature of a case in which *anyone* could be the suspect. In the meantime, residents remained on high alert. There was a surge in reported attempted child abductions as Torontonians became more aware than ever of the sort of monsters living in their city.

After investigating what felt like the thousandth tip, I didn't want to admit to myself then, but looking back, I was beginning to lose hope. Everywhere I went turned into a dead end. I wondered if Holly's killer was even still in the Toronto area. Had he left for somewhere far away to hide while we searched for him in vain? That wasn't something I wanted to accept, but it was a possibility. At that point, anything was. A city with millions of people and we had to find *one* unique arrangement of GATC nucleotides.

I could think of nothing worse than the investigative team not being able to find Holly's killer. Nothing more terrible than the police liaison assigned to her family having to tell them the case had gone cold. As a father myself, I could imagine the pain and suffering they were going through and the brutal lack of closure that would come if their daughter's killer remained out there … somewhere.

I also feared the murderer killing again. I had always been taught that these kinds of killers only stopped when they were caught. They enjoyed the rush of homicide and kept killing repeatedly if no one put an end to their depraved indulgences. Anyone who could so easily steal a child in the prime of life and hurt him or her in such a grotesque manner was apt to repeat the crime. Who

knew when the next murder would be? It could be weeks, maybe even years. But it would certainly happen at least once more. The children of Toronto might never truly be safe again as long as this butcher lurked the streets.

Not long after, Perry, Taylor, and Chief of Police Julian Fantino, along with lawyers' inputs, made the controversial decision to do a DNA canvass of Holly's Junction neighbourhood.

During DNA canvasses, police request voluntary samples from everyone in a geographic location — in this case an entire neighbourhood — to rule them out as suspects in an investigation. No matter how unrelated a person might be to the crime in question, the only way to find a suspect, the only sure method to uncover Holly's killer, would be to start eliminating people in The Junction until only one person couldn't be crossed off the list — Holly's murderer. The plan was to collect the DNA of every male who lived near Holly's home. Statistics gathered from multiple child abductions and homicide cases have revealed that a child's murderer likely lives very close to the victim.

The DNA was to be collected *strictly* for the purpose of investigating Holly's homicide. After the comparison of the collected samples to the DNA found on Holly, the DNA evidence of those sampled would be destroyed, never to be used again for investigative reasons. Canvasses such as these are seldom undertaken. They are, of course, massive violations of personal privacy. But canvassing for DNA isn't unheard of in Canadian law enforcement under circumstances similar to Holly's case, where a gruesome crime would otherwise be entirely unsolvable.

Even more controversial, though, is the utilization of genealogical DNA. Several high-profile homicide cases in the United States, especially long-standing cold ones, have been solved by using online genealogy databases to identify suspects through family connections. One such cold case, the murder of nine-year-old Christine Jessop in Queensville, Ontario, in 1984, was finally cracked in late 2020 by Toronto police when her killer, Calvin Hoover, was identified through this method. Hoover, who had been a neighbour and friend of the Jessop family, had killed himself in 2015 and a sample of his blood was retained by the coroner who performed his autopsy. Entering male DNA still in evidence from the Jessop crime scene into two databases, GEDmatch and Family Tree DNA, investigators were able to identify relatives of Hoover

genealogically, then link him positively to the DNA extracted from his blood now stored at the Centre of Forensic Sciences in Toronto.

In Holly Jones's case, our investigative team briefed the DNA canvassers on the collection protocol to be employed. Each person canvassing had a clipboard with every male's name living in a six-block radius from Holly's family. The canvassers were deployed to front porches across The Junction and instructed to request DNA samples from males living in each home on their lists.

Many neighbours enthusiastically offered their DNA to help streamline the investigation. Others, understandably, participated in the process suspiciously. Then there were those few who refused for privacy reasons or out of an abundance of caution. The men who declined had to be ruled out as suspects in ways other than via voluntary DNA evidence.

One day, not long after the commencement of the DNA canvass, two police constables approached a red-brick house on Bloor Street West. It looked like most of the other homes on that stretch of Bloor, standing tightly beside its neighbours, with peeling brown trim, a sloped shingle roof, and a shabby green porch facing the busy street. The house, like many old Toronto ones, had been divided into apartments. A few mailboxes were affixed to the brick wall adjacent to the front door, each to hold a different tenant's mail.

That day, any men who lived in the house were asked to surrender DNA samples to the constables if they wished to participate in the canvass to find Holly's killer. Most obliged. Then the officers came to the last apartment — a small one-bedroom on the upper floor. Scanning their clipboards, they saw that a man named Michael Briere lived there alone. *Another name to eliminate*.

The constables knocked and heard shuffling and the creaking of floorboards through the thin door as someone made his way toward them. Soon, a man appeared like a mole emerging from a hole, blinking in the doorway of his shadowy apartment. He had dark rat-like eyes and a fat, pale face that stared back at them blankly.

"H-hello?" he stammered, sweaty, maybe even stunned at the sight of two constables outside his apartment. But then again, many people were nervous in the presence of police; it was hardly unusual.

"Hello, Mr. Briere?" one constable said, checking to make sure that was the right name from the list on the clipboard, then meeting Briere's gaze again, who

glanced away fretfully.

The constables quickly explained that they'd come to his door to collect DNA samples to rule out possible suspects in Holly Jones's murder. When they finished, they asked, "Would you be willing to submit a sample?"

The officers and Briere contemplated each other, the latter seemingly dumbfounded.

"No," Briere finally replied. "I'm sorry, no." Then he shut the door hurriedly, no doubt retreating back into the darkness of his apartment.

Briere's name wasn't crossed off the list. Instead, it was circled.

As he slipped back into his burrow that day, I'm sure Briere felt safe, maybe even lucky. The police hadn't come to arrest him, didn't know who he was. He was just another man who lived in the neighbourhood, probably one among many who had refused to volunteer DNA. Briere likely thought there was no reason for anyone to suspect a quiet computer engineer like himself. He might have believed he'd escaped a life in prison.

The two constables conducting the canvass at Briere's residence were good police officers. A key skill in solving a mystery is the ability to observe, to see beyond what an ordinary person might detect, to employ every sense as a guide when something just doesn't feel right. And that was what the constables did that day. While they were speaking to Briere, they looked past him over the threshold of his doorway into what lay inside his apartment in plain sight.

The first thing they noticed when Briere swung open his apartment door was the overwhelming stench of bleach that rushed into the hall as if a big mess had been cleaned up, *maybe even a crime scene*. As sweat beaded on Briere's brow while he nervously listened to the constables explain the details of the canvass, they peered past his slumped shoulders and spotted a set of dumbbells sitting in the living room … *on green carpeting*. Less observant people might have been distracted by Briere's jumpiness, his hurried scampering back into the darkness of his apartment. While that might be suspicious, it might not have been enough to convince the lead detectives there was something nefarious living in that house on Bloor Street West.

However, Briere tripped off alarm bells that day, and the constables told the lead investigators what they saw. With this new information, Briere's status was elevated to a person of interest.

Even with what we knew about this man, his weights, and his green carpeting, we continued investigating other suspects and tracking down new tips that came in. We couldn't afford to get tunnel vision and had to keep an open mind, letting the evidence lead us to the truth when every passing moment the true killer could be moving farther and farther out of our grasp. Still, we maintained a careful eye on Briere, ensuring we knew where he was moving to and when, and what he was doing when he left his Bloor West apartment.

Even if Briere had refused to volunteer his DNA, that didn't mean we couldn't access it some other way. Under Canadian law, anything discarded as trash can be retrieved by police without a search warrant. Many pieces of personal garbage can contain DNA evidence: razor blades, bubble gum, dental floss, Band-Aids, hairbrushes — the list goes on. Perry and Taylor sent a surveillance team to watch Briere and collect anything he threw out that might contain the DNA crucial to solving Holly's murder. The surveillance team consisted of a large number of skilled people whose job it was to observe Briere without being seen. Unknown to him, they followed him everywhere he went, whether on foot, by car, or by train. They moved like ghosts in the background of his life, waiting for the moment when he slipped up and disposed of something from which DNA could be extracted.

On a June day, more than a month since Holly's parents made their 911 call, the surveillance team had been trailing Briere for weeks. That day, they kept their eyes fixed on the shabby green porch on Bloor West. They were parked, waiting for him to exit the building he lived in.

Eventually, the white front door of the house opened, and in its frame stood a dishevelled, heavy-set man. It was Briere. He closed the door behind him and strode down the narrow concrete stairs and onto the sidewalk, moving through the pedestrian traffic. The detectives followed, keeping him in sight as he bobbed up and down on the busy sidewalk. After some time, Briere stopped at a convenience store and bought a can of pop.

All these years later it still astonishes me that Briere had the nerve to leave his home ever again after what he'd done, to stroll so casually as if he were as innocent as the mother pushing her baby's carriage past him. He should have buried himself in his rundown apartment, boarded himself up, refused himself

the pleasures of seeing the light of day. How could he sleep each night on the bed where Holly had perhaps taken her last breaths? How could he look at his hands as they cracked the tab of that soft drink can, knowing they were the same ones he'd wrapped around the neck of ten-year-old Holly?

But he did. He sauntered around that day, acting as if he were an ordinary, unremarkable man. Sipping on his soda, he glanced in shop windows as he passed, enjoying the sunshine as it beamed on his pale skin, entirely unaware of the detectives watching him. Finally, he took a last gulp of soda, then absent-mindedly dropped the can in a city garbage bin.

This was it! The piece of evidence everyone had been hoping for.

Briere had no idea what he was doing, that his pop can would be what sealed his fate. The can was immediately seized as evidence, and Briere's saliva on it was used to compare his DNA to that found under Holly's fingernails. In the meantime, more surveillance team members were added to spy on him around the clock. We couldn't lose him now.

The DNA was a match. Perry and Taylor ordered the arrest of Briere immediately. In the days following the man's apprehension, the circumstances surrounding Holly's disappearance and death became clearer. She had walked her friend home, the first time she'd done so alone before. Undoubtedly feeling triumphant at her successful navigation from home, she left her friend's front yard and began the walk back. Holly and her mother had planned to run errands together that evening, so she headed home with purpose, mindful, as her parents had taught her, to look both ways, to not talk to strangers, to come straight home.

As Holly walked past Briere's building, he was heading out, searching for a child. He admitted to frequently viewing child pornography and said that day he was determined to realize his sick fantasies. Briere knew whichever child he abducted, whoever he took back to his dingy apartment, he would have to kill her. He rationalized that it was the only way to keep his secret quiet.

Had he not found Holly that day, he likely would have grabbed another child some other time in 2003. Sadly, Briere snatched Holly, passing her first before doubling back, coming up behind her, and placing a meaty hand on the back of her neck.

"If you scream, I'll kill you," he threatened.

Holly obeyed, perhaps believing if she acquiesced he'd free her, maybe too paralyzed with fear to even attempt escape.

Witnesses walking along Bloor West on that early May day saw them together. Many recounted seeing an angry "dad" or "older brother" with a young girl who, by the expression on her face, appeared to be in trouble with him, not an unusual scene to see, so commonplace, in fact, that no one thought to report this man and girl together to police when Holly's investigation began.

Briere led Holly up a narrow stairway into his apartment. Within the hour, he had killed her. By the time Holly's parents' worry turned into dread, by the time they picked up the phone to call 911, Holly was already gone.

In the days that followed, Briere disposed of Holly piece by piece, soaking every inch of his apartment in bleach to hide the bloodstains.

Some commend Briere for pleading guilty — at least he spared Holly's family a painful trial. However, he could have spared them the suffering that came with losing a daughter. His repentance came only after he was caught.

Briere could have turned himself in all along; he was well aware the whole city was searching for him. Instead, he hid like a rat in a hole, hoping we wouldn't find him, scrubbing away the evidence, cruelly scattering Holly's remains in the cold, dark waters of Lake Ontario as if she weren't worthy of ever being found. Only when he was confronted with what he'd done did he attempt to take responsibility for his actions. But nothing will ever be enough to right his wrongs. No level of acknowledgement of the damage he caused could ever bring Holly back.

I walked through Briere's apartment with Perry, Taylor, and other members of our investigative team after the man's arrest. The dark energy in that place was palpable. We headed up a creaky stairway to a door with a long mirror mounted on it that led into Briere's suite. I couldn't help but think that Holly might have last seen her reflection in that dusty mirror before she was ushered into the room where she died.

No one deserves to be treated the way Holly was, to look upon her own reflection, unrecognizable in terror, moments before dying. Briere can apologize a million times over; it won't bring him any redemption. I'll always remember the choices he made that day in 2003.

He could have let Holly go.

Michael Briere was automatically sentenced to twenty-five years in prison after his guilty plea. Holly's files were packed up and filed away with all the other solved homicide cases that year. Toronto began to heal from the pain of losing Holly, but no one ever forgot her. Parents continued to keep a vigilant eye on their children. Teachers monitored their schoolyards like hawks. Children, including my own, were sensibly instructed that if anyone ever put a hand on them or threatened them when they were out and about alone to *scream*. It just might save their lives.

After the resolution of Holly's case, I got word of a detective position that had opened up in Homicide. I didn't hesitate to apply.

Holly's case had reaffirmed my desire to work murders. There were innocent people out there being hurt in unimaginable ways, and I could lend my efforts to hold those who harmed them accountable.

Homicide was on the same floor as Sex Crimes in police headquarters, so I didn't have to move very far for my new job. I packed up the photographs, notebooks, and pens on my desk into a small banker's box and made the trek across the hall to my new squad. Unsurprisingly, my new environment looked exactly like the one I'd just left: dated carpets, fluorescent lighting, plain grey walls, desks clumped in quads around the room. There was one difference, though. Prominent on one wall for everyone to see was a wooden plaque embossed in gold letters. It read: "No greater honour will ever be bestowed on an officer, or a more profound duty imposed on him, than when he is entrusted with the investigation of the death of a human being."

I thought for a moment about those words and realized the magnitude of what I was undertaking. Of course, I'd seen a lot of death in my time as a police officer up to that point, but I had never been responsible for the management of the intricacies of a homicide. In that moment of understanding, I was overwhelmed but also hopeful. I remembered Holly Jones and Emanuel Jaques and all the children like them who had come between and the ones who would come after. I felt that this was where I belonged, helping to patch up the wounds of wrongs that had been done, even though such wrongs could never truly be righted.

I did, and still do, believe it's an honour to be a homicide detective. What greater responsibility can there possibly be?

3

Wyrsch, Aschwanden, and Kaufmann: Fatal Triangle at the Delta Chelsea

IT WAS 2006, NOT LONG after Labour Day weekend. The Canadian National Exhibition had packed up only a week prior, a Toronto summer tradition long the hallmark of summer's end. The exhibition grounds were once again empty and desolate, as always the case in September. Nights were becoming cooler as the sun sank below the horizon a little earlier each day. Many Torontonians were perhaps already thinking about the long, harsh winter that would ensue in a few months.

My kids begrudgingly returned to school, groaning as they headed out our front door early in the morning with their new backpacks and lunch boxes strapped to their backs. *Why couldn't summer last just one more week?* they no doubt muttered to themselves. I, too, asked myself that question even now. Feeling a little listless after the long weekend, I drove to police headquarters with gloomy thoughts about the fall that was creeping closer and closer.

But not everybody in Toronto had such musings. The early September weather was pleasant, and to some, summer still continued. Each day groups of tourists exited the arrivals gate at Pearson International Airport, hailing taxis and climbing aboard tour buses destined for downtown, eventually wheeling their suitcases through the grand entrances of the city's many hotels.

Those spending vacations in Toronto stuck out in the city like sore thumbs. I could spot them easily on sidewalks through my windshield on my commute to work. Native Torontonians strode determinedly to streetcars, stepping over litter in their paths, weaving in and out of crowds without skipping a beat.

Morning commuters had messenger bags and purses slung over their shoulders and checked watches impatiently as they waited for streetcars to glide to a stop. Tourists, on the other hand, clearly moved at a different pace among a sea of hurrying Torontonians. They carried big cameras around their necks, had large maps clutched in their hands, and made time to appreciate the great things about the city that those who lived here often took for granted.

Seeing groups of tourists on my drive into work made me smile. *A moment of peace*, I thought. *At least they're going to have a pleasant day today on their vacations*. Meanwhile, I knew someone somewhere was living out a last day. However, as I watched tour groups take photos in front of graffiti art painted on brick walls on Queen Street West, I forgot about that for just a second or two.

The weekend after Labour Day on a Sunday around noon, an Air Canada flight arrived at Toronto's Pearson Airport from Zurich. The flight was nearly nine hours long, a timespan that can so often feel like an eternity on a plane, each moment set to the sounds of crying babies, snoring old men, and chatty seat neighbours.

Once the aircraft arrived at the jetway, the passengers eagerly rose from their seats to shake their sleepy legs back to life. They reached into the overhead bins to retrieve their carry-on luggage and began the agonizingly slow shuffle toward the plane's exit. In the terminal, they cleared Canadian customs and then baggage claim, hoping their suitcases hadn't been lost as bags slowly dropped onto the carousel, their tired eyes watching as luggage lumbered before them hypnotically. The time from the flight's landing to grabbing their baggage might have felt almost as long as the trip in the air itself. Soon, however, they were wheeling their suitcases out of the arrivals gate and climbing into taxis and tour buses. Some people that day were returning home after visiting family or travelling abroad, others were coming to Toronto to study or work, still others were on vacation. No matter their final destinations, each passenger on the flight that day was looking forward to a quiet, restful evening after a long haul across the Atlantic.

One large tour group had boarded that plane together in Zurich, its itinerary starting in Toronto and extending to other major Canadian cities over a three-week period. The group's members wandered out of the arrivals gate with

the rest of their fellow passengers and into the afternoon sunshine. Their tour bus was waiting for them, idling just outside arrivals. It was destined for the Delta Chelsea Hotel, the group's accommodations in the heart of downtown. The driver stowed their luggage as they clambered onto the bus. The seats were comfortable, the air conditioning turned on high, and they could finally relax after the long flight.

Once everyone was seated, the bus departed and the airport faded from view. They passed apartment buildings, shopping centres, street lights, and various road signs. Soon the city skyline came into view, the CN Tower visible in the distance like a beacon, head and shoulders over other buildings. The travellers craned their necks to gawk at it out the bus's windows. Finally, the bus sighed to a halt at the Delta Chelsea.

A grey concrete goliath at the corner of Yonge and Gerrard Streets, the hotel was rather institutional-looking outside but fine enough inside. Certainly not luxurious accommodations, but its proximity to Toronto's tourist attractions at a reasonable price point was nearly unparalleled. Besides, the travellers just needed it as a place to lay their heads. They'd be too busy exploring the city to spend much time cooped up in hotel rooms. More than a hundred Swiss tourists poured into the hotel's lobby, chatting with one another, making small talk about their flight, planning their next moves. The hotel staff chaotically jumped from group to group, handing out room keys and noting special requests. Then, group by group, the tourists headed to the hotel's bank of elevators off the lobby, yearning for good showers and rest on comfortable beds.

Three of the tourists stuck close together — a small young woman and two larger young men. They wheeled their luggage onto one of the tightly packed elevators, squeezing in snugly beside others who had travelled with them on the Zurich flight. The woman scanned the elevator buttons for their floor number. As she pushed the correct button, the doors shut smoothly with a soft clunk and the elevator ascended. The atmosphere was quiet as the passengers stood nearly shoulder to shoulder, shifting their weight, clearing throats uncomfortably, keeping eyes locked on the floor numbers displayed above the doors: two, three, four … For the weary travellers, every floor the elevator passed got them closer to theirs. No doubt they could feel their sore backs and tired legs aching to lie down. Then the elevator dinged; the trio had arrived at their floor. Once the

door opened, they stepped out and headed down the hallway in search of their room.

The room was comfortable enough for the three of them. Two queen beds sat side by side separated by a wooden bedside table. The beds were made tightly with white sheets and red floral comforters. The floor was carpeted, the walls covered with bland patterned wallpaper. The room smelled rather stale, as if no one had occupied it for some time, but otherwise it was clean, and the beds with their fluffy pillows and crisp white sheets seemed inviting.

The travellers placed their suitcases below the window that looked out onto neighbouring buildings and a now-overcast Toronto streetscape. That night they might have headed out for dinner on Yonge Street or browsed in stores at the nearby Eaton Centre before heading back to the hotel.

Once back at their hotel room, they likely readied themselves for sleep and sat on their beds chatting excitedly about their trip. If so, they opened their itineraries — sheets of paper handed out to them as they boarded the tour bus — and perused the entirety of their trip. It was going to be an exciting few weeks. Next, they probably set an alarm before turning out the lamp on the shared nightstand to settle in for a restful sleep. Tomorrow morning they'd make an early start.

While the Swiss tourists were spending their first night in Toronto, I was home asleep in my bed. It was almost five o'clock in the morning and my house was still dark. My pager buzzer broke through the silence of the early morning just before the alarm I'd set to wake up for work. Groggily, I rolled over in bed to check it: "Call duty desk."

I slung my legs over the side of the bed, wiped sleep from my eyes, and switched the alarm off as I stood, no longer needing it. Making my way quietly down the stairs so as not to disturb my wife and kids, I headed for the landline mounted on the wall in the kitchen.

Getting a pager call never gave me a good feeling. So stumbling to my telephone and punching in the required numbers made me think of all the horrible things that could have happened, all the terrible things I'd already witnessed as an investigator. I had now been in Homicide for a couple of years, and investigating suspicious deaths hadn't gotten any easier. Readying myself as

the phone rang, I gazed at my tired reflection in the dark kitchen window. After two long rings, someone picked up.

"Duty desk," the constable on the other end of the telephone line said.

"Steve Ryan. I was paged to call in."

"There's a homicide reported at the Delta Chelsea Hotel. Call 52 Division and the detective there will brief you." He then told me the detective's name.

I thanked him and hung up the phone, making a note of the investigator I was to speak to, then punched in his number.

"Hello, Staff," the detective addressed me by my rank after I identified myself. "We've got a double homicide at the Delta Chelsea Hotel. Two deceased, one male, one female. A third victim's in the hospital. Not sure he'll make it."

"Is the hotel secured?" I asked to ensure the premises were on lockdown.

"It's all frozen, Staff," he confirmed. "No one can come in or out."

It would be a while before I knew all the details of what had happened, but soon enough I learned more about what had prompted a panicked 911 call from the hotel.

At just past four o'clock Monday morning, the lobby of the hotel was completely quiet. The staff working the overnight shift sat at their desks, sleepy-eyed, watching the clock, only a few more hours remaining until their work was finished. Soon, the early bird hotel guests would be up and on their way to breakfast or business meetings. But for now it was peaceful, with only the rumbling of the occasional car speeding down an empty Yonge Street sounding in the distance.

On the nineteenth floor of the hotel, a woman and her husband were tucked snugly into the bed in their room. They had arrived in Toronto on an Air Canada flight from Zurich barely sixteen hours earlier on Sunday. The room was hushed by a constant white noise emanating from the air conditioning unit, interrupted only by the man's occasional snores. It was a tranquil scene — the couple wrapped up comfortably in the shadows of early morning.

Then a sudden scream pierced the silence, jolting them both awake. The kind of cry that signalled danger. The sort of frightening noise that tells every fibre in a listener's muscles to run and hide, even if they aren't sure where to run to or from whom or what to run from. The couple sat straight up in bed and

blinked at each other in the darkness. *Was there a fire?* The alarm hadn't rung. The only hint of danger was the scream, and then it came again and again, a blood-curdling cry that seemed to come from the hallway just outside their door.

Frantically, the man felt for his glasses, which were cloaked in darkness on the table beside him. The woman rose from the bed and ran barefoot to the door to squint out the peephole in time to see a blur of a man running past her room in the hall. He was wearing boxer shorts and an oversized sleep shirt; perhaps he, too, had just rushed out of his room, disturbed by the screaming. But she noticed he was covered in blood. His clothes, face, arms, and legs were stained dark red. She stood for a moment, frozen in shock, face still pressed against the peephole, processing the man who had just run by her door, staring at the circular view of the bloody aftermath he'd left in his flight down the hallway. Willing her scared body to unfreeze, she raced as fast as she could to the telephone in the room. It was next to her husband, who was sitting upright, still befuddled. She punched down to the front desk. "Call the police!" she cried into the receiver when someone answered.

The concierge dispatched hotel security to inspect the situation, calling 911, as well. When the elevator door opened on the nineteenth floor, the security guards discovered a man lying in a pool of blood. Clearly, they thought, he'd been running away from something. The elevator call buttons were smeared with bloody handprints, likely from his urgent and disoriented attempt to get away from something. The man was breathing but just barely. Paramedics arrived on the scene quickly, strapped the injured man to a stretcher, and rushed him to the nearest hospital in an attempt to save his life.

When police constables first arrived on the scene, the man found at the elevator was already in the back of an ambulance, but the bloody trail he'd created marked the path he'd taken down the nineteenth-floor hallway. He'd obviously lost a lot of blood and had collided with walls, tripping over his own feet. His path could be traced down the hallway by blood, an indication of every step he'd taken, every wall he'd stumbled into, from the elevator call buttons all the way to a single hotel room door. Obviously, he'd exited from there: a bloody handprint was smeared across the entrance where he'd touched as he'd weakly opened the door to run. Could the man's attacker be hidden in the room?

The constables rapped on the door, but there was no response. They pounded again. Still silence.

It's important to note that the police on the scene that day needed to ensure that more victims weren't hidden within that room. If anyone was in the same state as the man at the elevators, they had a legal duty to perform CPR, keeping him or her alive until more paramedics arrived. Regardless of whether someone answered their knock, they needed to enter that room.

The constables got hotel staff to unlock the door hurriedly. The key card reader flickered green, and the officers flung open the door. Behind it was a horrific scene, worse even than what was discovered in the hall. Lying just in front of the doorway was a young woman. She was unconscious, face up in bloodied pyjamas. Her hair and skin were soaked in blood. She appeared to have suffered a number of stab wounds; a Swiss army knife was planted in her sternum.

The whole room was red. From the beige carpets, to wallpaper, to the ceiling, every single surface was slick with blood. As they entered the room, they spotted another man, also unconscious, the chest area of his shirt bloody, indicating stab wounds to the chest. He lay on one of the room's two queen beds.

Both victims were completely still — not a single sign of life.

Police officers in Ontario can't pronounce death except in three scenarios: when a victim is clearly in a state of decomposition, has been decapitated, or has been bisected. Even though the two victims weren't breathing, without any of the aforementioned exceptions in place, the officers couldn't be sure they were dead. The constables swiftly began CPR, praying there was still a chance they were still alive, that they could stay alive until the paramedics arrived on scene. I can't imagine the nightmares those officers still wake up from after relentlessly attempting to resuscitate two bloody corpses. Nothing they could do could save them that morning, but they still tried.

Ambulance sirens once again rang out down Yonge Street as the officers performed chest compressions to no avail. Soon, paramedics dashed into the room, and within minutes, pronounced the second and third victims dead.

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That was the story I was eventually told that Monday morning. The man found at the bank of elevators passed away in hospital shortly after his arrival there. So I was now investigating a triple homicide.

Parking my car at police headquarters, I walked from there to the nearby Delta Chelsea. Coincidentally, the hotel had for years been the venue of my office's Christmas luncheons and other large social gatherings. The last time I'd been in the Delta Chelsea was December 2005. The place had been decorated with Christmas trees, garlands, and twinkling white lights, and I was surrounded by happy colleagues carrying Christmas presents under their arms and chatting about their plans for winter vacations.

Now the atmosphere was dramatically different as I shoved open the glass front doors of the Delta Chelsea. The entire hotel vibrated with fear and anxiety, and the staff were visibly worried, whispering to one another nervously as I entered the building. My partner, Dan Neilson, greeted me when I arrived. He was a giant of a man with fine blond hair and a moustache. Despite his size, he was an exceptionally gentle fellow with a keen attention for the smallest details. I could tell he felt the tense mood in the hotel, too.

We nodded solemn good mornings as we strode past the staff and toward the elevators. Rumours were spreading swiftly from person to person that day — *There was a murderer loose in the hotel. He could be anywhere*. The edgy ambience was enough to make even us glance over our shoulders once or twice as we moved through the eerily silent lobby. It's a strange feeling being somewhere so quiet and sombre that's typically busy and filled with human life — like standing in a busy street in the middle of a snowstorm, with no cars or people to be seen, just the infrastructure meant to support them. Of course, the hotel wasn't deserted. All the guests were holed up in their rooms. I knew where they were; I was the one who had ordered that nobody leave.

The outset of a homicide investigation is chaotic, but anyone who's enthralled by mystery novels and whodunnits can tell you that. When the crime first occurs — a body is found in the parlour or priceless artwork is missing from the museum — no one can be sure what happened. That's what makes the genre so attractive, I suppose. The reader's brain searches for an answer in the clues the author lays out. Not dissimilarly, a detective arrives at the true end of a terrible story and must work to turn back the pages, given the evidence available, to

figure out how and why the tragic ending occurred. The one person, or people, who could tell the story best can no longer speak. The investigator must be that victim's voice.

It's because of this nature of homicides, in which things unfold slowly and rarely make sense to begin with, that an investigator must employ an abundance of caution when conducting an investigation. To lose a piece of evidence when the whole story of a homicide hasn't been uncovered yet, can jeopardize the entire investigation and the carriage of justice. I wanted to preserve as much evidence as I possibly could, so I had placed the entire building on lockdown until Dan and I could figure out what had happened on the nineteenth floor. A constable stood on each floor of the hotel. No one could come in or exit. The person who committed this crime could have been anyone: a guest at the hotel, a member of the hotel staff, or someone wholly unrelated who had walked in off the sidewalk. But one thing was for sure: *If the killer was in there, we had him or her trapped*.

The media had already begun to gather outside the building, taking pictures of the front entrance. Reporters, too, were whispering. Similar stories to the rumours that were floating around the hotel spread from person to person as the reporters congregated just beyond the hotel's entrance, waiting for news from the investigators within. Was there a tourist killer in Toronto? How did the three travellers know one another? Was it a random attack? There were no answers yet. But the story wasn't unfamiliar to journalists. They had reported on something like this recently — two tourists found dead in their hotel, a situation strikingly similar.

Two Canadian travellers — Domenic and Nancy Ianiero — were found slain in their hotel room in February 2006 near Playa del Carmen, Mexico, on the Mayan Riviera. The Ianieros were staying at a resort where their daughter's wedding was to be held. But they didn't make it to the celebrations. Shortly after their arrival at the resort, the husband and wife were murdered. The news of their deaths shook Canadians everywhere, and updates on their story continued to be featured on the news for months, even years, afterward. To this day, the identity of their killer remains a mystery.

Everyone's mind immediately went to the Ianieros when news of three murdered tourists in Toronto broke. Could something similar have happened in

the Delta Chelsea? Was a tourist killer loose in the city? City councillors were already calling the Homicide office with concerns, wanting to ensure that the summer tourist population was safe from danger. But at that point we couldn't promise anyone's safety. We didn't have enough information.

The Emergency Task Force (ETF) had swept through the Delta Chelsea in search of other possible victims. When the attack first happened, we were unsure whether more injured or dead tourists lay behind closed hotel room doors. The ETF moved from room to room, clearing each floor one at a time. Thankfully, after the ETF's sweep, no one else was found hurt. While this was excellent news, there was still no suspect uncovered … not even a trace of one.

Dan and I waited for an elevator in the lobby to take us to the crime scene on the nineteenth floor, as I'm sure the three travellers did the evening before this all happened. Truthfully, I don't take pleasure in elevator rides. The creaks and groans of an old elevator shaft and the tight, confined spaces within them are enough to make me nauseous on the best of days. However, the ascent that day was especially unbearable, knowing that a brutal crime scene awaited us on the opposite side of those elevator doors.

When the elevator opened onto the crime scene, we got our first view of the bloodstained aftermath of what had transpired in the early hours of the morning. Dan and I said good morning to a member of Forensic Investigation Services (FIS) who was waiting for us. "I've got to warn you," he told us. "This isn't the worst of it." He gestured to the blood in the hallway as he handed us disposable white overalls to slip over our clothing as well as boot covers to put on our shoes.

It's rare that full personal protective equipment is needed in an investigator's walk-through of a crime scene, but when there are bodily fluids that could be biohazardous, such as excessive amounts of blood, detectives must suit up for their own safety.

I could envision the young man as he ran from his room, tracing him as he fled to the elevator doors, hoping he might escape. But fleeing from whom? I wasn't yet sure. Guided by the FIS man, we followed the blood-smeared walls and red footprints down the hallway, away from the elevators and to the door of the room where the other two victims lay.

Dan and I soon learned that the FIS fellow who had warned us wasn't exaggerating. That room by far was one of the most gruesome spaces I'd ever set foot in. From the ceilings to the carpets, it was red. I'd never seen that much blood before in my life.

We began to analyze the crime scene, painstakingly searching for hints of what might have happened. Three tourists murdered in their hotel room, not a trace of their murderer to be found, was strange, indeed. But the more carefully I examined the evidence before me, the weirder the scenario became.

"Looks like there was some sort of fight," I observed, noting what seemed to be indications of a struggle in the room.

The blankets were torn from the queen bed closest to the window, and the sheets were drenched in blood. The fight had progressed throughout the room, leaving blood on the surfaces where the victims had run as they struggled for their lives. The blood trails carried into the bathroom, and of course, out the room door and down the hallway, ending at the elevators.

Dan pointed at a table. "Everything looks like it's here."

I glanced over and saw wallets, keys, and cameras. It would have been easy to grab them if this carnage was a result of simple theft. "Their suitcases look untouched," I said to Dan. Splattered with blood, the luggage remained, I presumed, where the tourists had left it beneath the window. Shaking my head, I added, "Why did this all happen? I don't get it. What's the motive? Maybe they met someone when they were out last night before returning to their room. Perhaps that someone followed them back."

Moving closer to the male victim who lay in a peculiar position on the second queen bed, I murmured, "Strange …" The man seemed curiously calm, while the dead woman in the room appeared to have known her end was imminent, frozen as she was in obvious panic and fear. The same, I was told, could be said of the man discovered in the hallway. But the fellow on the bed didn't look as if he believed death was drawing near. Propped up on pillows, he was almost entirely untouched by blood. The sheets were still pulled tight and tucked into the mattress. He wore glasses and held a book in his lap. Not a hair on his head was out of place. If not for the blood staining the chest of his shirt and the pallor of his complexion, I might have thought he'd merely dozed off

while reading and would soon rise from his nap. *Why didn't you run?* I wondered as I scrutinized the blood that had dripped from his chest onto his legs.

The way the blood had dried was unusual. At first it had run downward toward his feet, suggesting he was standing at some point during the attack, but then the trails of blood cut off at an abrupt right angle and ran along his calves and thighs toward the bedsheets. It appeared as if he'd lain down *afterward*. But it was odd that he'd picked up a book and placed his glasses at the end of his nose after being stabbed by an intruder. That didn't make sense to me. Had he simply accepted his death while his companions had tried fervently to avoid theirs?

"There were no footprints besides the ones left by the man found in the hallway, right?" I asked one of the FIS people who, along with his colleagues, was documenting the evidence in the room.

"None," he replied bleakly.

Where had the person who committed these crimes gone? Given the hellish mess of the room, it had to be impossible to leave without tracking bloody footprints down the hallway. So how had the killer come out of this untouched by the blood covering almost every corner of the room? My mind sifted through possibilities, but nothing made sense.

Dan and I had the FIS team members tear apart the room. They took everything — carpet, bedsheets, mattresses; no piece of the crime scene went uncatalogued. Again, at that point, we had no idea what we were looking for or at. So I wanted everything to be bagged and carefully analyzed, and even had the walls taken down to their studs. What was once a gruesome crime scene suddenly seemed more like an overhaul renovation. Every piece of the room that had been touched by the terror of murder was taken away. But even then a sense that something bad had happened was evident. The air in the room was heavier, maybe colder, stained with fear and bloodshed as it was.

After some digging around, we thought we had a good idea who the three deceased travellers were. Their probable names and addresses were found using their passports and the hotel's guest records. The man who had run from the room and collapsed in front of the elevators appeared to be Thomas Kaufmann. The woman who police constables found on the floor of the hotel room was likely Nadja Wyrsch, while the man discovered on the queen bed holding a

book was possibly Andre Aschwanden. They had all arrived the previous afternoon on an Air Canada flight from Zurich, travelling with a tour group. The trio hadn't even been in Toronto a full twenty-four hours. Curiously, the room was registered only to Wyrsch and Aschwanden.

Believing we had the correct identities of the victims was still insufficient. To confirm who they were, we had to contact their families and have them verify they were, in fact, Kaufmann, Wyrsch, and Aschwanden. To do that, we had to get in touch with police in Switzerland through INTERPOL, which liaises with police services around the world. INTERPOL put us in contact with a Royal Canadian Mounted Police (RCMP) officer stationed at a Canadian consulate's office in Switzerland. That officer went to work coordinating with the Swiss police and the victims' families to obtain confirmation of identity.

There were many tears shed that day when the Swiss police knocked on the doors of the families of the three travellers. I wondered if their parents had grown worried as the hours passed on Monday and they hadn't heard from them. Did they think the worst when news broke of the tourists who had died in Toronto? I pictured them watching television intently that day, praying it wasn't their son or daughter, jumping at every phone call or email they received — would it be them? But then they finally got that knock on the door, and all hope of their children being alive crumbled. My heart broke for them. Every parent's biggest and most terrifying fear is losing a child. So that day my heart went out to the families who had lost their children.

The victims were confirmed to be Nadja Wyrsch, twenty-four years old; Andre Aschwanden, thirty-five years old; and Thomas Kaufmann, thirty-five years old. We were able to establish a connection with their families to relay information and learn more about the events that had preceded the victims' trip. Despite the pain the families were no doubt experiencing, they provided us with whatever valuable information they could to help solve the mysteries of the three deaths.

Dan and I spent a large portion of that morning and into the afternoon going from door to door on the nineteenth floor, taking down the names of the occupants and asking if they'd heard or seen anything suspicious the night before. Of course, everyone staying on the floor where the murders had occurred

had heard the commotion that had taken place early in the morning, but they each recounted the same sort of story more or less.

"I heard screaming at around four in the morning," one woman told me. "I thought it might have been someone coming back to the hotel drunk. I didn't check on what all the commotion was about." She looked as if she felt a little guilty, as if she wished she'd done something or had opened her door to see what was going on. Perhaps she felt she could have saved someone.

"There was nothing you could've done," I assured her. Unless she was a trauma surgeon with a full operating room tucked away in her suitcase, no number of good intentions could have rescued the trio.

One man who had recognized the racket in the hallway as a desperate cry explained, "I heard the screaming, and when I went to see what was going on, I saw a running man covered in blood."

"Did you see anyone else?" I asked.

"No one else, just that young man."

In fact, not one witness had seen anyone besides Kaufmann in the hallway that night. Surely, with that many eyes watching, someone should have seen the person who had stabbed the trio escape. But no one told us about a second person in the hallway.

Something wasn't adding up.

"Do you think there's anyone else to find?" I asked Dan as we headed back to police headquarters. We had the same question: *How could three people be murdered without a suspect?*

I had contacted the tour operator earlier and set up a meeting with the guide, who was willing to speak with me about what she knew concerning Wyrsch, Kaufmann, and Aschwanden. Usually, at that time of day, she would have been escorting her group to lunch after a morning of sightseeing. But the group's itinerary for the day had been cancelled, given the three deaths, police questioning, and lockdown of the hotel. So Dan and I sat together with the guide in the Delta Chelsea's lobby in a pair of big armchairs as she recounted a brief memory she had of the murdered trio.

"I remember them," she confirmed to us. "I spoke to them shortly after their arrival in Toronto. I met the tour group at the hotel, and those three flagged me

down before check-in. Kaufmann wasn't supposed to be on this trip. The other two invited him sort of last-minute, so they wanted me to add him to the tour. He'd travelled with them from Zurich."

"Did you notice anything particular about them?" I asked. "Anything suspicious?"

"Other than adding a person to a tour at the last minute? Kaufmann flew all the way to Canada with no idea if there was room for him on the trip. I thought that was pretty strange. But otherwise, no, they all seemed happy, I guess."

"Did you see them after that meeting?"

"No, I scribbled down payment information and noted Kaufmann's name to add to my files, then left them to check in. That was the last time I saw them. I expected I'd be seeing them again for the start of the tour …" She wrung her hands in her lap.

The guide's information left me with more questions than answers. *Why had Thomas Kaufmann suddenly decided to take this tragic trip? What was his relationship to his two travelling companions?*

Thanking the guide as she stood to leave, Dan and I sat back down and I tapped my pen on my notebook as I processed what she'd told us. Then we left the Delta Chelsea and returned to police headquarters.

My head was swimming with theories of what had occurred in that nineteenth-floor room. The leading one was: *there was no suspect to find at all*. Perhaps one of the three guests in that room had killed the other two before ending his or her own life. My guess at the moment for the culprit was Aschwanden, the man lying on the bed as if waiting calmly for death to take him, not fighting against it like Kaufmann, who had screamed and run from the room, or Wyrsch, who was killed as she seemingly tried to escape.

But, of course, there were complications with that theory, factors that made it less probable. One was that the murder weapon was found still embedded in Wyrsch. *How could it be that someone stabs himself to death, then posthumously kills his travelling companions?* He would have to rise from the dead to accomplish such a macabre feat. I've seen a lot of crazy things as a police officer, but never has the supernatural figured in my investigations. Still, all my instincts screamed that Aschwanden had something to do with these homicides.

As strange as that theory was, it was the only one that truly made sense. There was no sign of anyone other than the three travellers entering or exiting that room. They were new to the city, having never been to Canada before, and had no history in the country that would attract someone to harm them. There were also no valuables taken from their room. A fourth party committing the crime just wasn't likely.

After years of investigating crimes, I'd learned that an open mind is essential. While I had my suspicions, I couldn't let that lead me astray. Many great investigators throughout history have been ruined by their own confirmation biases — interpreting evidence in ways that are only favourable to their leading theories. In my experience, evidence points to a natural conclusion, and evidence that contradicts initial beliefs shouldn't be discounted just because it doesn't fit the mental mould being cast by the investigator. So until forensic evidence either confirmed or denied my suspicions, I recognized that my theory of Aschwanden being the one who had slaughtered Wyrsch and Kaufmann was highly unlikely to be the correct story.

The man who rose from the dead. Who could believe that?

I sat at my desk mulling over all that I'd learned and seen in the past few hours. Sometimes it hit me like a ton of bricks — I'd be going through an investigation and never take time to process the horror. It was as if I'd build a wall to prevent shock from settling in. But now, with my thoughts to myself, I began to process everything. Suddenly, it felt as if I was carrying an immense weight over my entire body. The hellscape of the hotel room came back to me in flashes, as if my mind had taken snapshots to preview later: bloody bedsheets, deathly pallor, crimson footprints leading down the hallway.

Then the phone rang on a corner of my desk, and all the images and emotions that had come over me in a storm instantly cleared. I had work to do.

On the other end of the line was Dr. Michael Pollanen, Ontario's chief forensic pathologist. He'd been conducting autopsies on the victims all day. "Steve, you're going to want to come down here and see this."

At that time, the coroner's office was across the street from police headquarters. The morgue where forensic pathologists conducted autopsies was located there. I hurried across the street behind headquarters and into the foyer of the coroner's building; in all honesty, visiting the morgue was the least

favourite part of my job. It might be strange to think of a homicide detective with an aversion to death, but while death was a part of my everyday life, it wasn't something I ever really felt *comfortable* with. Passing security, I entered through a door at the back of the room. On the other side of that door was a setting that seemed very much like a hospital … only not.

The floors were sparkling clean, fluorescent lights buzzed overhead, and if not for my sense of smell, I might have thought I was in a hallway in the world's quietest emergency room. But the whiff of death in the morgue is all-pervasive; it escapes even into the foyer when first entering the building. The odour is nearly impossible to describe: something rotten and putrid that you can almost taste as much as you sniff. Once you inhale it, you *know* it, even if you've never experienced it before. I'd leave the morgue that day with the scent of death nestled into every fibre of my clothing; it would follow me the rest of the day.

To the left was a ceiling-high wall of stainless-steel refrigeration cabinets in which corpses were kept cold while awaiting autopsy. To my right was what I could only describe as an operating room, with a large overhead lamp and a cold steel table where autopsies were conducted. Dr. Pollanen stood in that room, with Andre Aschwanden lying on the table. The Delta Chelsea victims' bodies had been transported to the morgue for forensic analysis earlier that day, and the chief pathologist had been busy all day working diligently to determine their causes of deaths. Pollanen's tools were laid out on a table beside him, with an assistant close by watching as the doctor carefully took notes. It was as if I could see the metaphorical cogs turning in Pollanen's head. Then he peered up over his glasses and noticed me in the doorway.

"Ah, Steve, come in." Pollanen waved me into the room with a big gloved hand. He was in full operating attire — gloves up to his elbows, an apron over his scrubs, a shield covering his face, and a surgical mask protecting his nose and mouth, his glasses carefully perched over the mask.

I stepped into the room in my leather shoes and suit jacket, looking as out of place as I felt. He proceeded to write down his final thoughts in the notebook before gazing up at me again from behind the face shield.

Pollanen was something of a legend among those who worked for and with him. Stories about him had spread throughout the coroner's office, police force, and Crown's office. Whether they were true or not, I guess I'll never know. He

was rumoured to have graduated with an undergraduate degree while still a teenager, more than four years earlier than most people do. Shortly thereafter, he went on to medical school at the University of Toronto, one of Canada's most prestigious institutions. He was the youngest in his class, four years junior to the rest of his classmates. Forensic pathology was always his passion, and he entered the specialty without even thinking twice about it. You could tell he loved what he did. He was meticulous in his examination and always confident in his conclusions.

A forensic pathologist's role in a homicide investigation is to ascertain the underlying cause of death. Pathologists are experts in human fluids, cells, and tissues. They understand disease and injury at an expert level, in a way someone can only do after studying the subject for years. The medical expert's opinion is crucial in building a strong body of evidence to use in court. No matter how obvious something appears, a forensic pathologist must determine the cause of death. Only after his or her examination can we determine whether or not someone was murdered. If a person was shot, for example, and happened to suffer a heart attack at the very same instance and that was what killed him, then whoever fired the gun might not be criminally responsible for the gunshot victim's death.

I stood across from Dr. Pollanen, with Aschwanden's body between us on the cold metal table under a blindingly bright light.

"Look at this," he told me, taking a pair of long forceps and pointing at the stab wounds on Aschwanden's chest.

Truthfully, I had no idea what I was looking at; all injuries appear somewhat the same to the untrained eye. Even after having spent years observing stab wounds in different law-enforcement settings, I can say that all stab wounds are bad to have, but not much else.

"These are hesitation wounds," Pollanen said with authority.

I still didn't understand what he was getting at, and he could tell.

"Hesitation wounds are shallow injuries often present in situations of self-harm," Pollanen explained. "You see, as human beings, we don't possess a natural capacity to injure ourselves willfully. Every system in our bodies fights each day to keep us alive. Injuring oneself with a knife or another sharp object requires a lot of effort to override the instinct to preserve one's life."

The doctor bent his face close to the wounds and gestured for me to do likewise. Reluctantly, I obliged.

"These shallow wounds here are a result of that instinct. The presence of these wounds alongside these deeper ones that just grazed his heart makes me believe these stab wounds were self-inflicted."

"A suicide?" I asked to clarify.

"Official cause of death is self-inflicted stab wounds to the heart … so, yes," he said grimly. "His death would've happened very slowly. I doubt he would've known he was dying at all. The fatal injuries *just* grazed the heart."

"Is it possible he could've moved around with this injury?" I asked, my mind racing.

"Certainly possible. As I said, the injury was ever so slight. He would've been capable of doing lots of physical tasks before his eventual passing."

I left the morgue that day with the chief pathologist's official determination of causes of death of the other two victims, as well. Nadya Wyrsch and Thomas Kaufmann had each succumbed to stab wounds in their chests.

The story was starting to come together. Aschwanden attempted suicide before turning the knife on Wyrsch and Kaufmann. He attacked them as they slept, which explained why one bed in the room, Wyrsch and Kaufmann's, was splattered in blood while the other remained pristine. The two in bed attempted to escape, Kaufmann running out of the room and down the hallway, while Wyrsch hid in the bathroom where Aschwanden found her and delivered the fatal stab wound. By then, he might have felt tired or light-headed — after all, he'd mortally wounded himself. In his dazed state, he crawled into bed, opened a book, and put his glasses on to read. Perhaps he knew he was going to die; maybe the blood loss had made him act irrationally. But he died there, book on his lap, in a room awash in blood. He didn't rise from the dead, after all. Rather, his death was a protracted event, affording him enough time to take the lives of his travelling companions.

Further examination of the evidence confirmed this theory: the blade of the murder weapon found in Nadja Wyrsch was engraved with Aschwanden's name. A note to Aschwanden's mother was found tucked away on a small scrap of paper in his wallet. It read: "Dear Mama, I am not feeling well. My head is

aching and I am sad. I am lonely. Nadja and her friend are lucky they have each other. I have no one."

The deaths of Nadja Wyrsch, Thomas Kaufmann, and Andre Aschwanden — two murders and a suicide — still left me wondering why someone would do such a horrible thing. While the note indicated Aschwanden was lonely, why would he kill his two friends because of that? Information that came in through interviews the RCMP conducted abroad, as well as email correspondence with the families of Wyrsch and Kaufmann, made the motive clearer.

Nadja Wyrsch and Andre Aschwanden had known each other for years. He was fond of her and once before had told her he had romantic feelings for her, but Nadja was uninterested. Aschwanden was quiet, awkward, and moody, while Wyrsch was much more vibrant. They were simply not a good match but remained good friends, and he would often visit her at her family home. When Nadja, a medical lab assistant, decided to spend her vacation in Canada, Aschwanden told her he wanted to go, too. So they booked the tour together, planning to start their trip in Toronto and move on to the rest of the country from there. Perhaps Aschwanden thought this would be where Nadja finally fell in love with him after years of obsessively pining for her. Truthfully, Aschwanden was Nadja's second choice for a travelling companion. Her plans with her initial pick, one of her closer friends, had fallen through. She just didn't want to be alone in a new country. So she was happy to have a friend to discover Canada alongside her, and they planned their trip together excitedly, counting down the days before their early September takeoff.

Nadja met Thomas Kaufmann a short time after planning the vacation with Andre. Kaufmann was the opposite of Aschwanden. He was quite successful, held a number of degrees, had an extensive network of friends that spanned Europe, and was outgoing and witty. Most importantly, he was kind and gentle. Thomas and Nadja fell in love almost instantly, and the pair became inseparable. Nadja had found a partner who made her incredibly happy. Despite her happiness, Aschwanden still disapproved. He expressed to Nadja that he was very disappointed in her choice of partner and felt more entitled to her affection, since he'd known her for years and had waited so long for her to fall in love with him. Aschwanden didn't understand why she couldn't return his affection.

Kaufmann and Aschwanden never became friends, even though they'd known each other a few years prior to the former's relationship with Wyrsch. Actually, they had never really liked each other. Notwithstanding that, when Nadja expressed her desire for Kaufmann to join the Canadian tour she and Aschwanden had planned, the two men were okay with it. Nadja didn't want to be without her new boyfriend for nearly a month. Doubtless, Kaufmann didn't like the idea of Nadja travelling alone with Aschwanden, either. So Kaufmann bought a ticket to Toronto and joined the pair as they took off from Zurich. When they arrived, they'd contact the tour operator and have Kaufmann buy a ticket for the tour.

Witnesses who saw the three tourists on the flight to Toronto described them as appearing entirely ordinary — not one cause for concern. They reclined their seats and nestled into travel pillows just as everyone else did. On the tour bus, they chatted happily with one another.

I wondered if Aschwanden knew, as he boarded the plane, what he was going to do when they landed in Toronto. Did he bring that Swiss army knife everywhere he went, or had he brought it on that trip with a purpose?

Likely, I'll never know the definitive answer, nor will anyone else ever fully understand the process that resulted in the deaths of the three tourists that night. The only thing we'll ever know for certain is how the sad story ended. Perhaps the sole way to piece together what occurred is to consider the note Aschwanden left behind, as well as the information provided to us by friends and families of the victims. Taking all that together, it certainly seems like a crime motivated by jealousy.

Some reports called the murders a crime of passion, as if it was Andre Aschwanden's all-consuming love for Nadja Wyrsch that drove him to the brink of madness, that if he couldn't have her, then nobody could. Looking back, though, I think blaming a terrible crime on a man's passion is an unacceptable excuse.

What is passion? An intense desire, an uncontrollable enthusiasm, an all-devouring love. As if people can't have big, bold emotions without something going terribly wrong, as if we can't feel without causing hurt. Human beings are capable of feeling intense emotions such as grief, love, and heartache. On a given day, each person we pass on a morning commute to work is likely entangled in

one of these all-encompassing, sticky feelings, yet most people find a way to cope. It's not the emotions that are to blame.

Was it passion that picked up the knife and drew blood at the Delta Chelsea? Of course not.

In these sorts of crimes, so often called crimes of passion, passion becomes a scapegoat when, truthfully, passion is a matter of being alive. No matter how enraged or heartbroken someone becomes, he or she makes a choice to take another person's life, and passion, or any other emotion, has nothing to do with it. Andre Aschwanden decided to take the life of a woman he supposedly cared about very much. If he'd truly cherished her, he would never have hurt her or the person she loved.

Since the Delta Chelsea case in 2006, I've never been able to step foot in that hotel again. The concrete giant at Yonge and Gerrard casts a tall black shadow, reaching its gloomy fingers out to remind me of the horror that once took place there.

Today, when I see people dragging their suitcases behind them, heading toward that building, my stomach turns — because in those travellers I can imagine Nadya Wyrsch, Thomas Kaufmann, and Andre Aschwanden. I see what they were before I arrived at the Delta Chelsea that September, reminding me that even in the brightest, happiest times in life, such as a vacation with friends, death can be right around the corner.

4

Stefanie Rengel: Trapped Between Two Monsters

TORONTO DURING CHRISTMASTIME IS SOMETHING my heart unexpectedly yearns for as the first frost of winter makes the branches of the newly bare trees glitter and the frozen ground crunches beneath my feet. I have memories of running to catch up to my mother as she did her Christmas shopping downtown when I was small. My eyes couldn't seem to take in enough. Christmas trees stood taller than any tree my small body had ever seen before, their boughs heavy with bobbles and trinkets.

The windows of the street-facing shops at the Eaton Centre were animated by dazzling winter scenes. We'd make haste among the thousands of other last-minute shoppers marching diligently through the mall with crisp shopping bags dangling from their arms. And, of course, the memories flood back to me each year of waking up on Christmas morning to what felt like a sea of delicately wrapped packages placed carefully beneath our family's Christmas tree. The carols, the tinsel, the scent of freshly baked goods — it's almost enough to make us forget about the inhospitable winters that blow harsh winds and stinging snowflakes against the windows and roofs of our warm little Christmas scenes.

Indeed, I'm often reminded of why people told ghost stories throughout the Christmas season many years ago as I look out the windows of my house that frame the shimmering snow blowing across a dark, barren landscape in the dead of night. While Christmas is, for those who celebrate it, a signal of new life and redemption, the late days of December are harshly representative of death. The seemingly never-ending nights, and the sun that shines weakly in a grey sky surely feels like the end, as if the sun will continue to sink lower and lower into the sky each day and never dare to rise again. As if the faint warmth of spring

will never melt the icicles that hang forebodingly over our heads. As if the soil will never again be fertile enough to bear us food to eat. When my Christmas tree is taken down and the Christmas feast is cleared away from the dinner table, all that's left to do with the remaining days of the year is to stare out my windows overlooking the bleak white winter and anticipate the promise of a new year. New beginnings. The sun will rise again.

Christmas 2007 was entirely ordinary, like that of any other year. I found myself in the usual post-Christmas slump in the seemingly endless stretch of time between Christmas Day and New Year's Eve. Exhausted from the socializing, drinking, and eating of the days prior, I took the weekend to spend with my family. As usual, I was on call. When a homicide occurred, I'd be leading the next team called out to investigate. So I kept my pager close, crossing my fingers that it wouldn't buzz.

Homicides near the holiday season are always harder. Of course, all loss is difficult to cope with, but there's something about it occurring during the holidays, a time of year implicitly expected to be joyous, when life should be filled with close friends and family, laughter and good cheer. Experiencing loss around the holidays makes it all that much harder to bear. It's a harsh reminder that someone is missing who should have been by the Christmas tree unwrapping presents and raising a glass of champagne to a happy new year. My heart always breaks for those who lose a loved one near Christmas and New Year's. As the clock strikes midnight on a new year, it marks a year started *alone* without them.

The week between Christmas and New Year's Eve passed hour by hour, and my pager was silent for each. I sighed with relief every morning when I woke up to my alarm clock rather than to the buzz of the pager vibrating insistently from my bedside table. Perhaps the holiday season would pass without tragedy this year. I was hopeful as I heard fireworks fizzle in the sky on New Year's Eve, listening to their pops and cracks with my head resting gently on my pillow. The holidays were drawing to a close, and not one person in Toronto had died in a mysterious way. I felt a wary calmness envelop me.

New Year's Day was sleepy — the first day of a new beginning so often spent lounging and plotting the year ahead. Of course, our plans rarely pan out; frequently, the courses we set for ourselves on New Year's Day twist and turn

into unexpected territory. Having shed the skin of the previous year, we emerge with new selves uninhibited by past trials. Sometimes the year is filled with happy surprises, unforeseeable triumphs, unanticipated tests, and in the worst of years, unprecedented sorrow. But on New Year's Day we know nothing of what lies ahead. The path is obscured by time yet to be lived.

As this New Year's Day continued, I began to feel more and more confident the holiday season would pass without my receiving a call. I ate dinner, leftovers from the small New Year's Eve gathering the night before, and glanced out at the cold, starless night just beyond my kitchen table as I picked at my plate. No traces of light were left in the winter sky. New Year's Day was drawing to a close; only hours remained. Perhaps no one would suffer a great loss this holiday season. I was hopeful but cautious, anxiously eyeing the pager next to my dinner plate. Scraping my fork along the porcelain plate, I put the last scraps of dinner in the waste bin and deposited the plate in the soapy dishwater to soak as I returned to the table.

No sooner did I sit down than my pager buzzed urgently against the wooden tabletop. A pit grew in the bottom of my stomach.

"Call duty desk," the screen demanded. My family moved out of the kitchen as I made my way to the telephone to call work. The person who answered told me the following story.

It was a snowy New Year's Day in East York, but a quiet one. Snowplows had moved through the streets of Toronto on New Year's Eve, creating large snowbanks at the edges of sidewalks where children played and parents watched from their front porches, sipping steaming coffee and chatting about the previous night's New Year's Eve events. It was a lazy day, the short hours of sunshine filled with tidying up and planning for what was left of the upcoming week.

At just past 6:00 p.m., the sky was dark and the roads slick with ice. Gavin Shoebottom, a young accountant, was driving slowly to his home in East York from a New Year's Day outing, a trip he'd made innumerable times. A right turn here and then a left at the light. He could do it with his eyes closed, even if the roads were terribly slippery. Gavin flicked on the turn signal as he approached his neighbourhood. *Click, click, click*. He made his turn into the neighbourhood he'd lived in for years, listening to the Christmas carols playing at low volume

on his car radio. *It'll be some time before they stop playing those*, he probably thought.

His headlights illuminated the path ahead of him, moving over the snowbanks, the now-white front lawns of his neighbours, the icy road, and then … onto a girl standing without a jacket near the curb in the cold who suddenly fell into a pile of snow. *Perhaps she's slipped*, the accountant likely thought. But the girl didn't get back up. From the way she'd fallen and the fact that she stayed down, Gavin surmised that she was hurt.

He could have kept driving, reasoning that she'd clamber out of the snow, brush herself off, and continue on her way. But that didn't feel right. Without really thinking about it, Gavin skidded his vehicle to a sudden halt on the slick road. Unbuckling his seat belt, he slid out of the car, leaving the driver's door open and the engine running as he hurried to the girl, his way lit by his headlights and the weak street lamps overhead. As he got closer, he called to her, asking if she was okay and needed help.

The girl replied to him weakly that she'd been stabbed. Moving closer, he could see that she was bleeding badly. The man was panic-stricken but tried to calm himself as he bent to his knees and removed his jacket to hold over her abdomen where the girl was wounded.

"It's going to be okay," he told her, gazing into her tired brown eyes. Her expression screamed for help even though she was silent. Studying her up close, he figured she couldn't be older than fifteen, just a baby. *Who would do this to a child?*

"You're going to be okay," he repeated as he punched in 911. "Who did this to you?" he asked the girl, feeling increasingly more hopeless and out of control. Holding his cellphone between his shoulder and ear, he tried to compress the girl's wounds.

"Bags …" she said barely above a whisper. "David Bags."

The 911 operator dispatched emergency vehicles to their location. All Gavin could do was sit with the girl in the snow, wait, hold her, and beg her repeatedly to stay awake as sirens drew closer and closer.

To this day, I can't imagine how the accountant must have felt, watching the young girl fade out of consciousness, believing he was wholly incapable of doing

anything to save her or make her feel better. I'm sure he wished he were a trauma surgeon, an ER nurse, a paramedic, or anything but an accountant as he sat in that snowbank, praying the paramedics would come swiftly. I've been to homicide scenes where the victims are left alone to die, cases where they've been dead for hours in plain sight and neighbours have passed by without giving them a second glance. Gavin did more than he could ever imagine, giving the teen comfort and kindness as they waited for an ambulance.

Of course, the story I'm telling now doesn't have a happy ending — none of them do. How I wish I could say the ambulance came just in time and that the brilliant doctors and nurses at the hospital she was taken to performed a miracle. But that wouldn't be the truth. The young girl passed away in hospital — Toronto's first homicide of 2008.

The girl was Stefanie Rengel, a fourteen-year-old high school student studying drama at a local arts school. Her mother, Patricia Hung, and stepfather, James Hung, were both Toronto police officers, and the family lived in the same East York neighbourhood where Stefanie was found by the kind accountant.

I was silent on the other end of the phone call to my office, watching from my kitchen as my own children sat on the floor in our family room, playing Scrabble on the coffee table after dinner with my wife as more snow fell outside. They were just a little younger than Stefanie then, but safe at home. Stefanie's mom would never again get the chance to sit with her daughter and laugh the way my children were doing with their mother right now. My heart broke for Patricia.

I hung up the phone and headed upstairs to get dressed for work, thinking about Patricia Hung as I hugged my family goodbye. Even in my job, it's not often you're reminded how quickly your family can be taken from you.

When I got into my cold car, I could see my breath in front of me as I put the key in the ignition and listened as the engine struggled through the icy temperature to come to life. Letting the engine roar a bit, I began the drive through the snow to Toronto. Although it was early evening, the sky was quite black. I contemplated Stefanie as I drove.

Stefanie Rengel grew up in law enforcement households, with Patricia and James being police officers and her father, Adolfo Rengel, a court officer. Both

the Hung and Rengel families had rules and order, just as they did in their careers. As a consequence of Stefanie's orderly upbringing, she was a good kid who listened to her parents, was respectful to her teachers at school, and was a loyal and unwavering friend. Although she was fourteen and beginning to spend more time out with friends and travelling by herself to and from school, Stefanie always picked up her cellphone when her mother called. But that night she didn't.

Patricia and James Hung were visiting James's parents for dinner while Stefanie was at home with her younger brother on New Year's Day. When Patricia called Stefanie and she didn't answer, the mother had a nagging worry in the pit of her stomach. After she called the second and third time and her daughter still didn't pick up, Patricia felt something was terribly wrong, so she and James rushed home. The car ride, though not long, felt eternal. Stefanie still wasn't picking up the phone. When they approached their home, they were met by police tape and strobes, the latter flashing off neighbours' houses and the snowy pavement.

Being a parent is to live with anxiety — every missed call sparks panic. I know from personal experience. But usually calls are eventually answered, and all the worst fears instantly dissipate. What a relief! Parenting is worrying, so much so that while we fret we begin to expect the call will be answered, the door will open, all the nightmare situations concocted in the head won't happen, and we'll see our children safe and sound. But sometimes the worst nightmares become reality. I can only begin to imagine how Patricia and James felt as their nightmares came true. As they pulled up to their home, Stefanie still hadn't answered the phone.

Later, in the evening of January 1, I met Patricia, James, and Adolfo at a police station in East York. All three seemed hopelessly lost, as people do when they've lost a child, as if someone had ripped out vital pieces of them and they were merely breathing and blinking shells without purpose.

Patricia is a formidable woman. She sat with her husband and ex-husband in sorrow behind tear-filled eyes in which I could discern a fire burning. An anger. A purpose. A fervent and fierce desire to avenge Stefanie. Her bravery was such that though she'd lost her daughter merely hours earlier, she was ready to fight.

Although it was nearing midnight and she hadn't been home yet to rest, she trembled with grief as she shook my hand, insisting on being interviewed that night. She had information she needed to share that could help with the investigation, she told me.

I would have understood if Patricia couldn't bring herself to speak to me this soon, or to anyone ever again, if the pain was just too much and she wanted to withdraw from the investigation entirely. But Patricia possessed the strength of a heartbroken mother and was determined to fight for her child.

So, to my surprise, she told me the name of her daughter's murderer, words that no doubt stung like fire in her mouth. "It's not David Bags," she said definitively. "It's David Bagshaw."

Patricia then explained. Stefanie met David Bagshaw, or Bags, as many knew him, two years earlier when she was just twelve and he was fifteen. Even then, as a young teen, Bagshaw was tall and equally as broad, with blond hair and a vacant but piercing stare. He certainly appeared older than he was and acted older, too — acting up in school, skipping classes, being generally defiant of authority.

For a while, Bagshaw and Stefanie "dated." The two walked to a park together after school and sent each other instant messages, but Stefanie's mother kept a watchful eye on the older boy interested in her daughter. After all, the girl was only twelve. It soon became clear that Bagshaw wasn't the kind of boy Patricia, James, and Adolfo wanted around their child. In particular, he left inappropriate voicemail messages on the Hungs' home phone for Stefanie. Clearly, the relationship had to end, so the two as a "couple" barely lasted more than a couple of weeks. Responsible for her age, Stefanie heeded her mother's warning and broke off the relationship.

And so the Hungs thought that would be the end of the story: a potential nightmare boyfriend shooed out of their daughter's life. Stefanie started high school at a new school and met new friends, and no one thought about David Bagshaw again until two years later on a crisp October day in 2007, just before Halloween.

As evening neared, Bagshaw called Stefanie on her cellphone. He asked her to meet him at the curb outside her house. Slipping on her shoes, she made her way outside. Her parents were inside with her younger brothers, but she was still

within sight of her house as she approached Bagshaw. He was waiting for her with a large knife in one hand, his cellphone in the other. Stefanie stiffened as Bagshaw towered over her.

"My girlfriend wants me to kill you, but I don't want to," he told her with eerie nonchalance. "Pretend like I tried to and it didn't work. Take my phone so it looks like I left it at the scene after trying to kill you. If my girlfriend, Melissa, calls, you can say I screwed up."

Stefanie stood stunned as Bagshaw jogged away, likely thinking himself a criminal mastermind. Scared and sick to her stomach, she bolted inside her house to tell her parents what had happened.

It's important to remember that Patricia and James were both police officers. They were in a situation in which so many others would call the police — a child threatened with a knife by a former boyfriend. But the Hungs decided to deal with things themselves. It's the nature of being first responders to know that when stuck in a scary situation they have all the skills and training to fix it. Police officers deal with worse than high school bullies making what appear to be empty threats every day, believing they can handle everything. So the Hungs drove to the Bagshaw residence to talk to David themselves.

Patricia warned Bagshaw to stay away from her daughter. She insisted Stefanie wanted nothing to do with him or his girlfriend.

"If I had wanted to kill her, she'd be dead already," he retorted chillingly.

Patricia also phoned Melissa Todorovic, Bagshaw's girlfriend, and gave her the same warning, but Melissa was equally scornful.

After that incident, Stefanie continued living life as if everything was normal, and so did the rest of the Hung family. A strange incident, indeed, but after that they didn't hear from Bagshaw or Todorovic for months. The story of Bagshaw with a knife outside her home would be one she'd some day swap with friends over brunch when they chatted about crazy ex-boyfriends.

Because Stefanie went to a different high school than Bagshaw and Todorovic, she had different friends and interests, so there was no reason to think about the two for the rest of 2007.

But they were thinking about her.

Bagshaw couldn't be located in the hours following Stefanie's death. I got the sneaking suspicion that the kid was hardly an evil genius and was sure he'd

turn up sooner than later. In any event, we had Stefanie's identification of "Bags" and her mother's explanation of his bizarre visit to the Hung household in October, but the grounds for Bagshaw's arrest could have been stronger. When we did find him, I wanted to be ready with sufficient information to strongly ground an arrest.

In Ontario, police lay charges and the Crown attorney's office reviews their strength following arrests. As police officers, it's essential to ensure that the grounds for arrests are impenetrable, no matter if they think they know precisely who did it. A case for court is built with every move made leading up to the arrest. Every piece of evidence must unequivocally point to the arrested suspect. The Crown balks at any point of weakness in a case that could jeopardize the carriage of justice for the victim and his or her family. In this case, Bagshaw was just a few days shy of his eighteenth birthday. Courts examine a minor's arrests even more closely, which made it especially necessary to have further evidence before arresting Bagshaw. I wanted a witness, and the best one available was Bagshaw's girlfriend, Melissa Todorovic. So while constables searched for Bagshaw, I called Todorovic's mother, who agreed to bring her daughter in to be interviewed by Doug Sansom, my partner, and me.

Melissa, fifteen years old, was small in stature, had mousy eyes magnified behind thick glasses, and frankly, looked too young to be tangled up in a murder investigation. Sadly, I studied her mother, who sat worriedly beside her daughter in an interview room at 54 Division in East York. It was very early in the morning, and I could see the tired expressions clearly etched on their faces under the harsh fluorescent lights.

I knew Bagshaw had allegedly implicated Melissa when he threatened Stefanie in October 2007, but truthfully at that point, I didn't think she had anything to do with Stefanie's murder. Perhaps Bagshaw had taken something she'd said the wrong way or sought in cowardice to blame his actions on someone else, and who better than Melissa, who wasn't there to speak for herself. The girl who sat before me wearing salt-stained Uggs and a zip-up sweatshirt was a *child*, and children don't plan murders, do they?

I hoped Melissa would be able to tell me if Bagshaw had confided in her or done anything suspicious in the hours preceding Stefanie's death, but I was wholly unprepared for what I was about to hear.

Our interview commenced. Melissa told her story with a blank face that seemed cast in stone. "I heard Stefanie was spreading rumours about me and my boyfriend and joked to him that I wanted Stefanie dead. So he went to Stefanie's house to scare her and get her to stop spreading rumours. Honestly, I don't care," she added frostily. "I'm glad she's dead."

As she spoke, I suppressed a shiver, feeling as if I were in the presence of true evil emanating from all five feet, two inches of her. Now her story began to take shape. Bagshaw had stalked Stefanie outside her house for two days, waiting for her to exit. He was there on New Year's Eve, but Stefanie was inside with her family. So he came back the next day when her parents were out. Melissa knew all of this because, of course, Bagshaw had texted and called her before and after the homicide. She was given a play-by-play of the entire insidious plot. Melissa didn't need to be there to see it unfold. She had her cellphone to feed her every detail of every single one of Bagshaw's moves.

"So he phones you and says I have a knife and I'm going to Stefanie's house?" I asked. "What was your response to that?"

"I don't know … do whatever you want," she replied, almost whispering.

"And what did you think you meant when you said that?"

"If you want to kill her, then kill her," she said matter-of-factly, as if my point of clarification irritated her.

"Did you think of calling 911 and telling them there was a guy going over to kill Stefanie?"

Melissa shrugged. "No."

"How come?"

"I don't know …"

I waited as she mulled over the question. *Why wouldn't you call the police?* I wondered. *This whole sad affair could have been stopped if you'd only called 911.*

Doug Sansom picked up where I left off. "Melissa, if we ask David Bagshaw, will he tell us that you asked him to do what you're telling us?"

"Probably," she said.

"Is that because you did ask him to do it?"

Melissa nodded.

I glanced at Melissa's mother, who was now clearly in shock. She was already deeply disappointed with Melissa, appalled even at her involvement with

Bagshaw's plan. But this was different. From the expression on the mother's face, she was now staring at a monster.

"Melissa, do you know what you're saying?" the mother finally sputtered out.

The girl nodded.

Everything Melissa had said before that point was truly *evil* but not illegal. It isn't against the law to be happy someone is dead, even if it might be morally reprehensible. Nor is it illegal to refuse to call the police, even when someone knows something terrible is going to happen or has happened. It's disgustingly cruel, but Melissa owed no duty to Stefanie to warn her or get law enforcement involved. As well, it's not against the law to wish someone would die, even to say that desire aloud. Thoughts alone can't be policed.

But it is, undoubtedly, a violation of both morality and legality when someone *requests* another person to murder on his or her behalf. At the very least, it's aiding and abetting a homicide to encourage someone to take a life by counselling that person to act. Such a crime, at the most, is first-degree murder, essentially hiring a "hit man" to do one's bidding. Taking all that into consideration, I immediately halted the interview, cautioned Melissa, read her rights, and told her she was being charged with first-degree murder.

Through all that, Melissa continued to stare at Doug and me icily. Only her mother cried as the girl was escorted from the room. "I don't know why she's saying these things," Mrs. Todorovic said. "She wasn't raised like that."

I walked Melissa's mother out of 54 Division through the glass front doors she'd entered with her daughter earlier. This time she left alone, and I watched as she disappeared into the gloom at nearly four o'clock in the morning.

Hunching my shoulders against the cold rattling my bones, I shook a little, but perhaps that was my response to the girl I'd just placed in handcuffs. When I returned to the interview room, Doug and I exchanged glances. Never did we think a child could be so cruel, so evil. I shuddered thinking of the way she'd spoken so plainly about organizing a murder. Melissa didn't shed a single tear, not even when she was marched out of the room in handcuffs.

Then my mind turned to the Rengel and Hung families. Surely, they were still awake, sick with grief, spending their first evening of an eternity of nights without Stefanie, all because two kids wanted to hurt her. And for what?

Fortunately, Melissa's statement had given us enough information to be certain Bagshaw was Stefanie's assailant. We now also believed that Melissa was actively responsible for the planning and execution of the murder. More information would be revealed in their text and instant message history; Doug and I had already begun the process of seizing the phones and computers of all parties involved.

In the hours after Stefanie's murder, the teenagers of Rosedale Heights and East York Collegiate were thrust into a world much too grim for their young ages. Some had to process losing a friend. Many pondered the meaning of life and death, which until now had seemed something quite alien to their lives. Others were burdened with hidden secrets.

A sixteen-year-old high school student at East York Collegiate was sitting in his bedroom on New Year's Day. The bedroom looked like any teenage boy's: laundry piled in a corner, video game discs on the dresser next to empty soda cans, bed pulled straight in a haphazard manner. The day was sleepy, as most people's New Year's Days are. The sixteen-year-old spent it watching movies, texting friends, and dreading the return to school. Just after 7:00 p.m., he received a text message from his friend, David Bagshaw, inviting himself over.

Within minutes, Bagshaw was standing on his friend's front porch, illuminated by the neighbour's Christmas lights. As soon as the friend unlocked the door, Bagshaw shoved his way into the house and went upstairs to the teen's bedroom, which he knew well. The friend followed closely behind. Bagshaw's skin was bright red from the cold, and his jacket was … wet. The friend felt that something bad had happened, knowing Bagshaw was a loose cannon who started fights in school and harassed other students in the hallways. The way Bagshaw was now triggered the friend's fight-or-flight response, causing every nerve in his body to scream "Run!" But instead he stayed in his bedroom, watching Bagshaw cagily.

Bagshaw stared at his friend with hard, practically soulless eyes. There was an unsettling calmness about him, which was unusual because Bagshaw was never truly relaxed. Typically, he was angry or frustrated at something or someone. But not that day. Unzipping his jacket, Bagshaw removed it one large arm at a time, then he told his friend without emotion, "I killed Stefanie Rengel."

He wasn't remorseful, not even afraid of getting caught. Why had he come to the friend's house? He needed somewhere to hide his jacket, which was spattered with blood.

The friend panicked but told Bagshaw he could stash the jacket in the backyard. Then as quickly as he'd appeared, he left, whipping down the stairs and out the front door.

Watching nervously from his bedroom window, the friend spotted Bagshaw enter the backyard and bury the bloody jacket in a pile of snow. Then the friend ran downstairs to lock the front door. *What am I going to do?* he thought. Bagshaw was his friend, but this was wrong. He couldn't keep this a secret. After only a momentary struggle, he strode into the family room where his mother was watching television.

"Who was that?" she asked him, eyes still fixated on the show playing before her on the TV screen. She'd heard the commotion of the boys dashing up and down the stairs, but that wasn't unusual. Her son often had friends coming in and out of the house.

The teen inhaled deeply, mustering the courage to tell his mother the story of Bagshaw's bizarre visit and the bloodstained jacket lying in the snow in their backyard. Truthfully, he was embarrassed that he'd even said yes to Bagshaw's request in the first place. Now he had to tell someone, do the right thing.

At first his mother didn't believe her ears. Then she stood and went to a window to peer into the backyard where she saw footprints in the snow. That made her angry, then fearful for her son's safety. She knew she shouldn't have let him hang out with Bagshaw. Without any further thought, she walked over to her telephone and called 911.

Soon the backyard was outlined in police tape, and a white-and-blue Toronto police car sat in her driveway. She felt safer now but would be more so when the bloody jacket was out of the backyard and David Bagshaw was in handcuffs.

I was right in my earlier conjecture: David Bagshaw wasn't a criminal mastermind. He left traces of himself all over Toronto's East End. Witnesses had seen him fleeing the scene, and he visited both the friend and Melissa Todorovic the night Stefanie Rengel was killed. While he did vaguely attempt to evade

arrest, he didn't at all try to hide that he was the one who had killed Stefanie. Within hours of her death, most of the students at East York Collegiate knew Bagshaw had stabbed Stefanie. Some of them heard it directly from Bagshaw, others learned about it from friends who heard from other friends. Everyone was on the lookout for the six-foot-tall football player scurrying around in the cold without a jacket. He wasn't hard to miss.

Therefore, it wasn't long before police constables found him wandering the streets in the early morning without a place to go. They placed him under arrest.

Cindy Bagshaw, David's mother, was livid when she heard the news. She was sick, as she'd been most of David's life, with heart disease. But she made a point to phone me and point the finger at Melissa Todorovic, who she described as someone who actually "controlled" the knife her son used on Stefanie. Melissa had even installed spyware on the Bagshaw family computer to watch what David did. She was banned from the Bagshaws' house for being a bad influence on their son. Melissa was obsessed with David, Cindy said, and the two teens had a dangerous relationship. Without her he wouldn't have done this, she insisted.

I appreciated Cindy's phone call for what it was — a mother, even in poor health, defending her son with every bit of strength she had left. But David's culpability couldn't be vitiated because he had a controlling girlfriend. Of course, he could have said no. Cindy died of a heart attack only a month after her son murdered Stefanie. The last time she got to see her son he was in custody.

David Bagshaw's eighteenth birthday was quickly approaching. He was standing on the precipice of adulthood in the eyes of the law. Certainly, he was old enough to understand the consequences of causing someone's death. Even young children comprehend the concept of death as a permanent and irrevocable state of being.

Unlike young children who can shout "She made me do it!" when they're caught throwing rocks on the playground, Bagshaw had no such excuse; he wasn't a child. He'd made the grown-up decision to kill someone. In my mind, there's nothing more adult than that choice. It's one that begets adult consequences. Fortunately, grown-ups can't insist, "My girlfriend made me do

it" when they're discovered with a bloody knife in hand. While, undoubtedly, Melissa had influence over Bagshaw's actions, he elected to commit culpable homicide. The hitman is as responsible for the death of his target as the person who hired him.

Bagshaw didn't want to speak with Doug Sansom and me about what he'd done. He quickly retained counsel and kept relatively silent throughout our interview with him. This behaviour, of course, struck me as odd, since he hadn't kept his killing of Stefanie much of a secret previously.

Regardless of Bagshaw's level of co-operation, there was sufficient evidence against him: Stefanie's dying words, Patricia Hung's statement, and Melissa's corroboration of the New Year's Day events. Even more incriminating was the record of constant communication between Bagshaw and Todorovic throughout the months leading up to Stefanie's murder.

The two teens had exchanged tens of thousands of messages in the ten-month period they'd known each other. They'd stayed up late sending messages back and forth, with bloodshot eyes glued to their computer monitors. Every thought either of them ever had during that time was immortalized in a text or instant message. They filtered absolutely nothing. Shuffling through their communications gave us a harrowing glimpse into the minds of two killers.

It wasn't long into their relationship, perhaps two to three months, in May 2007, when Melissa first heard Stefanie's name. In a text conversation between Bagshaw and Todorovic, the latter asked David to name girls he thought were pretty. She was testing him, but Bagshaw couldn't see that, so he answered truthfully, naming a number of girls, a list that included Stefanie. This seemingly innocent conversation propelled Melissa into a jealous spiral. Even though it had been two years since David and Stefanie had their very brief relationship, *What if he wasn't over her? What if he'd leave me to be with Stefanie?* she might have thought.

It sounds ridiculous that a fifteen-year-old would care much about the attentions of a boy she had, essentially, just met. But Melissa had incredibly low self-esteem, and because of that, she prided herself on her ability to retain a boyfriend, any boyfriend. It didn't matter much what sort of person he was. What counted was that he paid her attention *and only her*. She believed that at any moment Bagshaw might leave her for another girl in school — someone

prettier, smarter, or more interesting than she was. *Why would anybody want to be my boyfriend?* seemed to be uppermost in her mind.

Now that Melissa knew there was someone else vying for Bagshaw's attention, or so she believed, that was all she could think about. Melissa was obsessed with the terrifying prospect of Bagshaw leaving her. Soon her obsession grew into a hatred for a girl she'd never met. Loathing for Stefanie Rengel consumed her.

The relationship between Bagshaw and Todorovic was incredibly tumultuous, filled with much more drama than a typical teenage romance. Melissa constantly accused David of cheating on her and even repeatedly threatened to cheat on him. Bagshaw harassed and assaulted Melissa's ex-boyfriends out of jealousy. Rather than terrifying her, the possessiveness David displayed delighted Melissa, who wanted undivided attention at all times. She often sent him chasing after people she disliked and frequently delivered threatening messages to rivals, claiming she'd dispatch David to teach them a lesson.

It's no surprise then, given Bagshaw's brutish history, that he was often physically violent with people in his life, including Melissa. The relationship was a disaster from the start. Someone was bound to get hurt. Their parents watched in horror as the teens fought and made up over and over. They hoped the two would end their doomed "romance" and find more balance in their lives, a healthier outlet than their mutual obsession. Of course, they refused to comply.

David and Melissa had absolutely nothing in common. Bagshaw was two grades ahead of Melissa. He enjoyed sports, while Todorovic preferred books. Melissa took advanced classes in school, while David wasn't on track to complete his high school diploma. There was only one thing they truly shared: their mutual hatred for Stefanie Rengel.

Melissa first introduced the idea of killing Stefanie in a text message in May 2007. She suspected David had cheated on her with Stefanie, something that had no substance in reality. "I'll just kill her," she said in repeated messages to Bagshaw.

Sadly, it didn't stop there. Their communications concerning Stefanie continued, Melissa elaborating on potential ways her perceived romantic rival could be eliminated: kidnapping her and taking her to an unknown location,

hiring a hitman to kill her for them. The sick and twisted blueprints for murder that came out of the mind of a fifteen-year-old astonished me as I read them. Never did I think a child could be so evil. Sure, I had investigated young offenders before. Many of the crimes they commit are mistakes they're too young to even fully understand. But Stefanie's homicide was no mistake. It wasn't a heat-of-the-moment decision made by two kids too naive to recognize the consequences of life and death. No, Stefanie's murder was meticulously planned over the course of many months.

Just before Bagshaw had lured Stefanie out of her home the first time in October 2007, Melissa had texted, "I want her dead, David, LOL. We've been through this. Even if it takes you a week … if it takes more than a week, then we're just going to be friends," referencing that she'd break up with Bagshaw if he didn't carry out their plot. David, for whatever reason, found the absence of Melissa in his life a scary enough prospect to attempt the mission she set out for him. He didn't follow through, of course, but Melissa knew then that, with sufficient persuasion, he would do what she told him to do.

Melissa continued to insist that David kill Stefanie. Each time they talked she reminded him of the consequences of his failure to complete the chore she'd assigned. She'd find someone new to be her boyfriend, and David would be all alone. With each passing month, Melissa became more persistent, while David became more enthusiastic to earn her approval and love. She reminded him he was running out of time. Soon he'd be eighteen, and it wouldn't be as easy to get away with murder. Melissa told him that his "clock" was counting down. She was smart enough to know that youths are typically sentenced less severely than adult offenders and wanted David to take advantage of that. In her mind, to take advantage of this, he had to kill Stefanie before his birthday in early January 2008.

So Bagshaw, with relentless pushing from Melissa, headed out on New Year's Eve to complete their plan. He texted Melissa as he watched Stefanie inside her home with her family celebrating the new year, calling their target multiple times that night, hoping to lure her outside as 2007 drew to a close.

He went home late that night determined to return the next day, which he did. After texting back and forth with Melissa, Bagshaw made the phone call,

obscuring his number. Stefanie picked up and heard the urgent voice of a young man on the other line. "Meet me," David demanded.

Stefanie didn't recognize the voice as Bagshaw's. She thought it belonged to an ex-boyfriend she'd recently broken up with. Perhaps, she thought, he wanted to make up. "Is that you?" she asked.

"Meet me," was the only reply.

So Stefanie slipped on her shoes to meet him, leaving her coat at home, figuring she'd only be gone a short while. But, as we know, she never made it back.

Equally vile and chilling was the record of Melissa's phone call to Stefanie after receiving word from David that she was dead. Melissa called Stefanie to make sure there was no answer on the other end of the line. When Stefanie didn't pick up, Melissa was satisfied that Bagshaw had completed the murder.

Reading the texts that laid out a murderous scheme sandwiched between LOLs and LMAOs made my stomach sick. *Did they not know what they were planning, the severity of the crime they plotted together to commit?* Of course, they knew they were conspiring to commit a murder. They were just too self-obsessed to care.

Stefanie hadn't spoken to Bagshaw in two years. The last time they'd "dated" she was only twelve years old. Stefanie had never even met, or spoken to, Melissa. The phone call Melissa made to Stefanie to ensure she was dead was the first contact Melissa had ever had with the fourteen-year-old. To Stefanie, they were total strangers. She had long moved on from her involvement with Bagshaw and was wholly unaware of the ill will directed at her.

So Stefanie went to school every day, hung out with friends on the weekends, and spent time with her family in between. She lived her life like a normal ninth-grader, did well in her classes, and was on track for a successful first year of high school.

In short, she was happy.

I'm often asked what drove the two teens to kill. Was their home life chaotic? Had they suffered some irreparable trauma that forever changed the way they saw the world? How could it be that two kids planned to do something so truly evil?

I wish I could provide some sort of explanation of the factors that made Bagshaw and Todorovic into monsters. It would be easier to sleep at night, knowing there are reasons why some people do the things they do. Typically, when searching through the past of someone who's done something terrible, we discover he or she was once a victim, too. An experience as a victim influenced future actions. Unfortunately, such reasons don't exist in this story. There's no way to explain Melissa and David's perverse fascination with murder. Their childhoods were identical to those of hundreds of thousands of other kids living in Toronto, or for that matter, around the world.

Normally, I wouldn't focus on the backgrounds of two killers — they received enough attention in the media and in court. Truly, this story isn't about them. But I feel compelled to share their backgrounds due to the bizarre nature they reveal, even though the two were very average teens with ordinary lives.

By all accounts, Melissa Todorovic grew up in a loving home. She spent her school breaks on vacations with her family, a privilege many of the children in her classes envied her for after she returned from Christmas holidays with a sunburn and souvenirs from her travels. Melissa was always outfitted in new clothes and had a new cellphone and computer. Her lunch was always packed for her to take to school each day. Her mother was a nurse and an excellent caregiver by trade and by virtue of being a mom. Her father was a hard-working, kind man. Their family was as normal as any other one in any Toronto neighbourhood.

Certainly, there was no indication that the young girl who sat next to the teddy bears on her bed texting friends each night was capable of murder. Melissa victimized others but was never a victim herself. It was cruel how she enjoyed the comfort and safety of family but felt entitled to take Stefanie away from her mother, father, stepfather, and little brothers. All of this is to say that I've spent years wondering why Melissa did what she did. Of course, my search for answers hasn't uncovered any new revelations. Melissa was petulant, entitled, and jealous — traits that drove her to kill.

David Bagshaw's upbringing was different in certain ways from Melissa's. His parents separated when he was young, and he spent his childhood travelling between his mom and dad. Their separation, of course, never affected their love for him. He was diagnosed with attention deficit hyperactivity disorder

(ADHD) when he was just a toddler. Attempts to treat his condition were infrequent and unsuccessful, likely due to lack of consistency. Throughout his life, he preferred to use physical force rather than words when dealing with problems that came his way. That's why he committed to playing football but not to showing up for English class. Unfortunately, this inclination led to him becoming physically violent, including altercations with his mother and father. He fought with them often — and violently.

Ultimately, David became a bully, assaulting and threatening his classmates. Standing over six feet and weighing more than two hundred and twenty pounds, Bagshaw probably seemed like a monster to those he beat up and terrorized. He acted like a monster, too. When we arrested him, it wasn't the first time he'd had contact with the police. His tendency to punch and shove his way through life had led to at least a few prior visits from uniformed officers. Despite this background, nothing explains why he committed first-degree murder. I wish I could point definitively to the moment in his life that made him who he is. Again, I've had years to ponder the issue, to wonder what evil lurked in Bagshaw all along that he leaped into action at merely the suggestion to kill someone.

It might strike some people as odd to think of the Toronto Police Service as a workplace, but it does employ thousands of people and is where uniformed and civilian members alike come to work each day and night. I'd known many of the colleagues I worked with as far as back as eighteen years old when I was a cadet. Of course, over the years, colleagues become friends and confidants. They're the people one faces danger with, pulling up to a call in uniform not knowing what awaits, trying to solve a murder in the early hours of the morning. And as time goes on, we get grey hair, backs that ache, lines that form on once-smooth skin. In the process, the Toronto Police Service becomes a community of members who have grown up together. Even those who might not have worked together come to care for one another.

Similar to the way many feel a closeness to classmates, neighbours, and friends of friends, I and thousands of others who worked in policing when Stefanie was killed experienced a kinship to her parents, Patricia and James Hung. They were members of our community whose hearts had been irrevocably broken. We mourned, too, for the girl who many of us never got to

know in life but who easily could have been our niece, sister, granddaughter, or daughter. As such, the Stefanie Rengel case was when I first contemplated leaving Homicide.

With each call I received late at night, each crime scene I walked through, each autopsy I witnessed, I felt further and further removed from life, leaving a piece of myself behind with every victim. At that point, I'd been a homicide detective for nearly four years, which meant a lot of lost pieces.

I became numb to all the joys and pains of life. I spent most of my days awake thinking about the suffering I'd seen, and all of my time asleep dreaming about it. It got to a point where I often felt as if I were living behind a pane of glass. On the other side of the glass was the life everyone around me was living. It was vibrant and colourful there, but I couldn't be where it was. I stood alone in a place that was dark and cold, in a soupy fog that twisted and morphed into the victims of the homicides I investigated. I spent all my time with them and could only observe everyone else from behind the glass.

When Stefanie was killed, the numbness dissipated. It was as if the glass had cracked. I could feel the pain, watching as my colleagues mourned their daughter. Looking at my own family, I realized how precious life was, understood there was a life to live but I wasn't living it. My mind and heart weren't with the living. I knew I couldn't keep enduring this pain year after year, so I told myself I'd leave, but then I didn't. Nine more years would pass before I did retire from Homicide.

Melissa Todorovic and David Bagshaw were in custody. The evidence against them was extensive — tens of thousands of text messages chronicling every thought either of them had in the past ten months, as well as eyewitnesses who noticed Bagshaw loitering around the Hung home on the nights of December 31 and January 1. But there was still something missing.

The eight-inch kitchen knife Bagshaw had stolen from his mother's kitchen to use in Stefanie's murder was nowhere to be found. Was this crucial evidence at this point? Certainly, the Crown could have proven the case without it. Doug Sansom and I, however, wanted no room to doubt Bagshaw's guilt. Often, in stabbings, the blood of the accused ends up on the murder weapon, as well. In repeatedly stabbing a victim, the attacker often cuts himself. Knives have many

nooks and crannies so that even attempts to wash blood from a knife often leave DNA evidence behind in the handle or under the screws that hold the weapon together. It was possible Bagshaw's DNA might be discovered on the knife he killed Stefanie with, further confirming he was the one who had attacked her. We needed to find that knife.

According to information Melissa had given us following her arrest, Bagshaw had thrown the knife into a backyard as he fled from the scene. But which backyard? She wasn't sure. It was a hasty getaway. While we didn't know exactly where the knife was, we were certain it was somewhere in that neighbourhood.

The snow was so heavy that January that efforts to recover the weapon from the scene in the hours after Stefanie's murder were unsuccessful. It was impossible to find in all that snow. Only a day or so afterward, Doug and I set up a canvass of the neighbourhood to do an in-depth search through the ice and snow to locate the knife, the final piece of evidence to complete the sad puzzle.

As I've said, that winter in Toronto was brutal. We were only a few days into January and the temperature continued to drop severely, snow piled heavily onto roofs and tree branches that shook under its weight, and the roads became slick with thick layers of ice. The knife was buried somewhere in this treacherous environment and conditions, but we feared we wouldn't find it, not until springtime at least.

The night before the search I gazed out at the snow that continued to accumulate in my front yard. It must have been over a foot deep at that point. The wind blew unforgivingly, erasing all trace of what had trekked through the snowy landscape prior. That wind was strong enough to cover any signs of evidence, I thought as I listened to my house creak in the cold.

It will take a miracle to find that knife, I thought hopelessly before heading to bed. We were going to try our best, anyway.

Working in Homicide has taught me that true evil exists — nothing could convince me otherwise. But, unexpectedly, my career investigating murder has also made me a believer in miracles. Often, when it's needed most, the unlikeliest things occur. That day, in early January, a miracle happened.

The morning of the neighbourhood canvass for the murder weapon it had been storming for weeks, and I was beginning to forget what a blue sky looked like. But that morning the clouds cleared, and the sun made an appearance for

the first time in weeks, shining hot and bright overhead. The temperature climbed unseasonably degree by degree, icicles hanging from rooftops started to drip drop by drop like popsicles on a blazing summer day, and a winter's worth of snow began to disappear, melting into water that trickled down driveways and into storm drains. Soon blades of grass were visible, poking through the snow in an early debut. In the span of a morning, the winter had disappeared.

Just like that, all impediments to finding Bagshaw's knife were gone. The weapon was located in under an hour.

David Bagshaw pleaded guilty to first-degree murder. He seemed now to understand the pain he'd caused and didn't want to put the Rengel and Hung families through anything more. Of course, a guilty plea is a poor substitute for the alternative — Stefanie being alive. No amount of apologizing could ever give them back their little girl.

Melissa Todorovic was less repentant. I can't say I was surprised. Despite all she'd told us on the night of Stefanie's death, she adamantly pointed her finger at her boyfriend, insisting he was solely to blame. The Todorovic family hired one of Toronto's best criminal defence lawyers — Marshall Sack — to defend their daughter and secure her freedom.

Sack was a force to be reckoned with in the courtroom. He strode in each day as if he owned the place, gown flowing behind him like the sail of a pirate ship flapping in the wind. Sack was a veteran lawyer, skilled at cross-examination and delivering compelling oral arguments. Now in his early sixties, he'd been practising law for almost forty years. He wore rectangular wire-framed glasses and gathered his grey hair into a small ponytail at the nape of his neck.

Sack was a staunch critic of the police and Crown, and for that I admired him. Criminal defence lawyers hold agents of the state accountable for our actions. Without them the liberties of everyone in our society would be at risk. It's their job to ensure that the people in the greatest positions of power — police, Crown attorneys, expert witnesses — are doing their jobs with integrity. Locking people up in prison for the rest of their lives should be taken seriously. If the evidence and conduct of the police can't withstand the test of a criminal lawyer's scrutiny, then, of course, the charge should be discarded.

Marshall Sack devoted his life to making sure his clients received fair trials. At Melissa's trial, he was sick with terminal cancer but continued bravely to do his job. In 2011, only two years after the trial, he died.

Sack maintained that Bagshaw was solely to blame, that he should have interpreted Melissa's insistence that he kill Stefanie some other way. He was angry and violent, had always been, and had taken what Melissa said the wrong way.

Obviously, the defence wasn't particularly strong, which was the argument of Robin Flumerfelt, the assistant Crown attorney. He was tall, thin, and confident. Striding into the courtroom each day, he appeared to know he had everything under control. Robin was a smart lawyer. I believed he could convince anyone of anything if given enough time to do so. He insisted to the jury that it was clear to see that Melissa had planned the murder with Bagshaw. She'd threatened to remove herself from his life if he didn't do it, expressly stating that she wanted Stefanie dead. Melissa, he argued, was a party to the murder of Stefanie, not merely an innocent bystander. The role she played was equal to Bagshaw's. In fact, she'd planned the whole affair.

The trial continued for several weeks. Every day I listened as each lawyer called witnesses, then examined and cross-examined them. They each, in turn, directed the jury's attention to evidence, spinning it to fit their narratives of events. It was a great battle between two skilled lawyers. Watching them strike and then parry each other's advances, I saw strategic stories being built block by block. When the two lawyers completed their closing statements, the jury was ushered out of the courtroom to decide whether Melissa was innocent or guilty. They deliberated for twenty hours.

Of course, we didn't know how long they'd take to arrive at a consensus. The time we spent waiting for the jury's verdict was characterized by near-palpable anxiety. Justice was now in the hands of the twelve people sequestered from the rest of the world until they reached a decision. Was the jury persuaded beyond a reasonable doubt that Melissa Todorovic knowingly caused the death of Stefanie Rengel? Or were they more persuaded by Marshall Sack's theory that David Bagshaw acted entirely alone?

On a first-degree murder charge, a jury can return with one of four verdicts: guilty of first-degree murder, guilty of second-degree murder, guilty of

manslaughter, or not guilty. On March 20, 2009, we were notified that the jury had reached a decision. The courtroom was packed shoulder to shoulder. As the jury members entered, the crowd stood.

The noise of creaky wooden chairs and shuffling feet filled the courtroom, and then there was silence. Each person in the courtroom watched with bated breath as the jury members took their seats and the foreperson stood to face Melissa. The pronouncement was "Guilty," a word that shot through the air as if fired from a gun. Everybody collectively gasped.

I felt as if I were going to vomit. I'd been so nervous, and suddenly with that single word, all the anxiety drained from my body, as if I'd just disembarked from a roller coaster, knees shaking, head feeling untethered. I'd wanted so badly to be a part of bringing Stefanie's family the justice they deserved, hoping the thorough work we'd done was sufficient. Glancing over, I saw Stefanie's mother hug her husband and son. They cried.

Obtaining a guilty verdict can be an incredible feeling after months of work for the police and the Crown. But no matter what the circumstances, it's never enough. I thought about Melissa Todorovic's parents and brother who were now without a daughter and sister, David Bagshaw's mother who died while he was in custody, and Stefanie Rengel's family who had to bury someone they loved so very much. The criminal justice system couldn't heal any of their wounds or numb their pain.

Weeks later, Melissa was sentenced as an adult, despite the fact she wasn't sixteen when the crime was committed. The judge heard the evaluations of two psychiatrists. One of them, Phil Klassen, deputy clinical director at Toronto's Centre for Addiction and Mental Health, described Melissa as exhibiting some symptoms of borderline personality disorder and compared her to Glenn Close's character in the movie *Fatal Attraction*. The judge considered Melissa's history, studied the psychiatric evaluations, and pondered the likelihood of her reoffending. Melissa read a statement in court in which she took responsibility for her part in the murder and expressed regret at what she'd done, but Justice Ian Nordheimer didn't buy anything she said. Medical professionals recommended Melissa be supervised going forward. If she were sentenced as a youth, once she served her time, she'd disappear from the system and there would be no way to keep an eye on her. Leaving her without supervision could

result in her reoffending. As an adult, however, she'd constantly be subject to parole observation. Ultimately, the judge believed an adult sentence was best for Melissa — and for the rest of society.

Melissa Todorovic remains in custody to this day, as does David Bagshaw. Their submissions to the Ontario Court of Appeal have so far been unsuccessful.

5

Katelynn Sampson: Guardians Who Kill

WORKING AS A POLICE OFFICER occupied more than thirty years of my life. Throughout that time, I grew up. The boy I was when I first put on my cadet uniform at the age of eighteen was a wholly different person than the man staring back at me in the bathroom mirror as I shaved each morning. Sometimes I didn't even recognize the reflection. In a lot of ways, I still felt like that cadet, with the wind whipping against me as I rode my motorcycle along Lake Shore Boulevard, youthful and free. But there were things that were obviously different. I now sat in traffic on Lake Shore, the same road I once speeded along believing I was invincible. Stealing a peek at myself in the rearview mirror, I could see my skin was duller than back then. Deep circles had formed under my eyes, and there were hints of grey at my temples. I was *older* — what a terrible thing to admit that you're no longer eighteen.

Suddenly, I was nearing forty, but my cadet days seemed as though they were only moments ago. I could see, as I sat in traffic, an apparition of that young cadet I once was whizzing past my window, fading away like a ghost over the horizon. While he was certainly sprier than I was now, maybe I was wiser. I'd done more, learned a great deal, and had grown into a whole new person.

Importantly, in the time that existed between who I was and who I became, I became a father. I felt like a mere child when they were born but grew up with them. I really knew nothing about the world then but was suddenly thrust into the role of raising little people, a task I believe no one can truly properly prepare for. They had their own viewpoints and ideas, likes and dislikes, fears and aspirations. Each day I spent as a father, my ability to love and to empathize

expanded. I was no longer that kid riding a motorcycle living only for himself. I had other people to live for. I had my family.

All the cases I investigated hurt me in some way. Each senseless loss of life left a wound that healed slowly, as well as a scar that forever reminded me of the trauma I'd witnessed. The things I'd seen were tattooed in the back of my mind when I closed my eyes. I could see the scenes of death and destruction as if they were movies playing behind my eyelids. The deaths that haunted me most frequently were those of children. Perhaps it was because I was a father myself. I knew the all-encompassing love of a parent for his child. I could only imagine the misery of death's veil separating a parent from someone they loved most.

I couldn't bear to see the pain a family struggled through when they lost the baby they brought home from the hospital swaddled in a blanket, the child whose bike they ran behind as he or she pedalled for the first time with two wheels, the teenager who brought tears to their eyes, the young adult striding across the stage at a high school graduation.

Unfortunately, I'd seen too many children die, had to tell too many mothers and fathers, grandmothers and grandfathers, aunts and uncles, that their babies had passed on. That never got easy — the shrieks, the tears, the pleading to a god they weren't sure was listening. I wanted to cry with them but never did. As their hearts broke, I stood silently. Only when I departed to solve a homicide and left them to plan a funeral would I allow myself a moment to feel the sadness and blink away the sting in my eyes with a shaky breath.

Yes, parents love their children, so much so that many would give their last gasps if it meant their kids could be saved. Parents would endure all manner of pain and suffering to make sure their babies were secure. But maybe not all parents …

Working in policing carves a window from which to see the dark underbelly of a community. While I'd like to say that all parents love their children unconditionally and would do anything for them, that just isn't the truth. Perhaps the hardest cases for me to stomach were the ones in which parents were the ones who hurt their children. I couldn't comprehend such cruelty. I had met many mothers and fathers who would sign away their souls if it meant one more day with their son or daughter, so how could some people harm their own kids?

It was early on a Sunday morning, maybe close to 3:00 a.m., when I heard my pager buzz: "Call duty desk."

I made the usual journey, slipping out of bed, blinking sleep from my eyes as my bare feet tiptoed along the creaky hardwood, down the stairs, through the living room, and into the kitchen to the phone mounted on the wall.

It was early August. The near-suffocating silence that typically blanketed me in the dead of night when I responded to a call was cut by a symphony of chirping crickets and croaking frogs. They sang out as I hastily moved my fingers from button to button on the landline, anxiety levels rising, stomach churning as the phone rang. Each ring brought a new image forward: deathly pale skin, bloodstains, unblinking milky eyes. All flashed back at me like strobes in my mind as I waited to hear the sad story on the other end of the line.

Then the ringing stopped and a voice answered. The person speaking to me recounted the story known thus far of Toronto's latest suspicious death: a seven-year-old girl named Katelynn Sampson.

Despite the early hour, it was already hot and humid in Toronto. Saturday night revellers were making their way back home as bars and restaurants closed. The streets were emptying, traffic was thinning. On the second floor of an apartment in Toronto's Parkdale neighbourhood, Donna Irving nervously called 911.

"It's really an emergency!" she cried into the phone. "My daughter choked and I think she died."

Donna said she'd left her seven-year-old daughter, Katelynn, alone to eat soup in a bedroom at two o'clock in the morning. When she returned, the girl wasn't responsive. Donna explained to the operator that she'd been anxious about calling, so before doing so, she'd had a shower and drunk a beer to calm herself. It wouldn't have helped Katelynn to proceed any quicker; Donna was sure her daughter was gone. The 911 operator tried to get Donna to assist the girl: if Katelynn was choking, maybe she could be saved. But the woman just sobbed, insisting nothing could be done.

Sirens squawked as paramedics sped to the scene of the emergency on West Lodge Avenue. When the paramedics arrived, they ran up the stairs of the building carrying a stretcher and other necessary equipment. Knocking on the door of the apartment in question, they listened as footsteps moved at a walking

pace toward them, then the click of a lock, a chain being slid open, the door opening. Before them stood a woman: Donna Irving.

She appeared to be upset, at least the tears that streaked her face indicated so, but her behaviour was unusual. The first responders knew how people reacted when faced with all kinds of tragedies. Most parents, when a child is in danger, scream, yell, pace, or at least move with some urgency to answer the door. Donna was quiet and sniffling, wiping her nose with the back of a sleeve.

She pointed to the second bedroom of the apartment and said, "In there."

"In there" was where seven-year-old Katelynn lay cold on the floor. The paramedics quickly rushed into the room specified by Donna.

There was no sign that the room they were in was a bedroom at all, let alone one belonging to a seven-year-old girl. It was bare, with no bed, blankets, or toys. The floor was splattered with what appeared to be blood. The only objects in the room were an old hockey net and a wooden two-by-four. Katelynn appeared to be unconscious in the middle of the room. The paramedics dropped their stretcher and ran toward her.

As they got closer, they could see something wasn't right. The girl's head had been shaved nearly bald, her legs and arms were bruised, one eye was swollen shut, a finger had a cut on it that reached to the bone. Her complexion lacked all signs of blood flow. When they touched a hand, it felt like ice.

One of the paramedics shook his head while the other prepared to resuscitate the girl, but Katelynn had been gone far too long, certainly much more than the alleged half hour between being left alone with her soup and Donna calling 911. She'd likely been dead for hours.

While neither of the paramedics was a pathologist, they knew in the pit of their stomachs that she'd been dead for quite a while. Then they noticed that the girl's body was covered with cuts and bruises, that the floor was bloody, and easily concluded that Katelynn didn't choke to death eating a bowl of chicken soup or anything else. They pronounced the girl dead at the scene. Meanwhile, Donna Irving sat fidgeting in a corner of the apartment, sobbing to herself.

Police arrived shortly after the paramedics. Assessing the state of Katelynn's body, they, too, knew something was wrong. The girl's injuries were some of the worst the responding officers had ever seen on a child or adult, so they charged

Donna with failure to provide the necessaries of life. At minimum there was negligence.

Parents have a legal duty to provide for their children, to keep them fed, clothed, warm, and dry, to give them the basic necessities required for any creature on the planet to survive. Failure to secure these basic needs can result in a criminal charge of failure to provide. Katelynn had clearly had serious wounds that weren't attended to by a doctor or even bandaged by her guardian. Donna had failed to care for Katelynn's health. Whether that led to the girl's death or not, the officers weren't sure.

Obviously, the officers at the scene had further suspicions about Donna's involvement in the girl's death, but they couldn't charge her with homicide yet. It was possible Katelynn had passed away choking on soup and the unattended injuries hadn't contributed to her death. An autopsy was called for to confirm the cause of death. Until then Donna would remain in custody under the charge of failure to provide the necessaries of life, so she was escorted out of the apartment and into the back of a police car, then was driven to the nearest police division.

After getting the gist of what had happened from the duty officer, I hung up the phone with a heavy heart. Katelynn Sampson was younger than my youngest child.

I walked outside my home, got in my car, and put the keys in the ignition, turning the air conditioning on high as sweat trickled beneath the collar of my shirt. In the sky, every star seemed visible on this extremely humid night.

It was now my job to determine whether or not Katelynn's death was a homicide. If her injuries contributed to or caused her death, and Donna Irving had inflicted them or failed to provide the girl with the necessary medical intervention to treat them, then Donna was liable for culpable homicide. An autopsy would uncover the truth.

At that time, officers had to attend autopsies as witnesses. We'd stand in suits and ties and leather shoes as the pathologists and their assistants in full surgical garb opened up the bodies of the deceased to find causes of death.

The coldness, the stench, the way human beings, once loving, living, and breathing, lay pale and lifeless on a steel slab was something I never got used to.

I'd worked in Homicide for nearly five years at that point and had witnessed countless autopsies, but each night I'd wake up in a cold sweat after dreaming about one.

I'd never been interested in medicine, the human body, or how it worked. If I'd never known what the layers of muscles, fat, and organs that keep us alive looked like underneath our skin, I'd have been happy. Seeing the human body weighed and measured like meat in a butcher's shop made my skin crawl as though it were covered with cockroaches, though I never showed what I was really feeling. Throughout the procedure, I'd stand stoically unblinking as the doctor's saw buzzed.

Of course, the worst to witness were the autopsies of children. Sadly, I'd been present at many children's autopsies, and every time I wished I could have saved the child from whatever course of events had put them there.

Babies, being especially fragile and prone to sudden death, comprised many of the suspicious deaths monthly in Toronto. They often pass away in their sleep, and Homicide is required to attend their autopsies to ensure there were no nefarious causes of their deaths. On autopsy tables, babies seemed like baby dolls, lying still in a way no squirming infant does in life, the rosy pinkness of a newborn absent from their skins. Staring at a baby lying lifeless always reminded me of how unfair life truly is, how it can be over before it even starts.

That night I wished I could have kept driving until the sunlight peeked over the horizon, driving past the city so I never had to see Katelynn lying in a morgue. But I did; it was my job.

My first task when I arrived in Toronto was to drive to the 14 Division where Donna Irving was being held. I hoped she'd be willing to speak with me about the circumstances surrounding Katelynn's death.

According to the police officers attending the scene earlier in the morning, it appeared there were other people living in the home Donna and Katelynn were in — likely a man, based on the large shoes at the front door and other belongings strewn throughout the apartment.

Whoever the mystery resident was, he was nowhere to be found. I wondered what information Donna might have concerning his whereabouts. If he lived with her full-time, he might also be culpable in failing to provide Katelynn with

the necessaries of life. Perhaps he was even responsible for her injuries. If not, maybe he could give us more information about Donna Irving and her daughter.

Perhaps, unsurprisingly, Donna didn't want to be questioned by me and my partner, Hank Idsinga. Hank was a tall, broad-shouldered man with hair buzzed closed to his head. He's now an inspector, best known for managing the investigation of serial killer Bruce McArthur. At our interview, Donna grumbled about being tired as she sat in a corner of the interview room slumped in a chair. It was nearly six o'clock in the morning, hours since the ambulance had arrived at her apartment and her arrest. She didn't seem to me to be a parent who had just lost a child. I'd seen plenty of those: their hopeless expressions, the way they moved as if they'd been hollowed to the core. Instead, Donna seemed bored. She stared at me sleepy and uninterested as I cautioned she might be charged with murder. There wasn't enough evidence to ground a murder charge, but I wasn't sure what Donna might reveal during the course of an interview. She needed to know what risks she was exposing herself to by talking to us and how the information she provided might be used.

While it's the morally correct thing to do, there's no imperative that people must talk to police if they're involved in or know the details of a homicide. Donna knew this, of course, because she pursed her lips and refused to say a word.

Donna and whoever lived in her house knew the most about what had happened to Katelynn and likely had knowledge of how the child had received the lacerations, bruises, and swollen eye. Their co-operation would have made the process of investigating Katelynn's death much simpler, but Donna's remorseless stare made it clear she was focused on looking out for only herself. Hank and I would have to figure out the necessary information on our own.

Luckily, information isn't hard to find if one knows where to search. First, we turned to Toronto police records to see if there were any prior visitations from police to Donna Irving's residence. Each time police are called to an incident, a record of that visit is logged and categorized as an occurrence. Occurrences detail basic information about an incident, including its nature, location, and the people present at the scene.

Sifting through a list of occurrences at Donna's address, we quickly found a domestic violence call the previous year. On the scene were Donna Irving, two children, and a man named Warren Johnson, listed as Donna's boyfriend. Johnson lived at the Parkdale address … so where was he now?

Neither of the two children at the scene the day of that previous occurrence was Katelynn Sampson. *Donna had multiple children*. When I learned this, sudden panic rolled over me. Now I was worried about the safety of two other kids. Could they have met the same fate as Katelynn? Were they hurt somewhere?

Donna had been asked where Johnson and her sons were, and while she was reluctant to speak to us about Katelynn, she did have information concerning the man and her boys. She said she hadn't seen them since the previous evening. Johnson had taken the boys to a Caribana celebration, a carnival that happens in Toronto every August. He hadn't been home since and wasn't there when Katelynn "choked."

We proceeded to call the Children's Aid Society (CAS) to see if it had records of the kids living in Donna's apartment. Rarely does abuse as severe as what Katelynn had endured happen all at once. It was likely if she'd been going to school or seeing other friends and family members with signs of cuts and bruising, the CAS would have been called at least once or twice before.

The CAS office confirmed it had been involved with Donna's family multiple times. She had four children who were biologically hers: two of them lived with her and Johnson, two were in the custody of the CAS. Furthermore, Donna had been granted formal custody of Katelynn only a few months earlier. *She wasn't the girl's biological mother.* Donna had been informally caring for Katelynn for just over a year.

Katelynn's biological mother was Bernice Sampson, Donna's long-time friend. Bernice struggled with drug addiction and had a history with the CAS herself. Katelynn had moved in and out of society care throughout her young life, sometimes for days or weeks at a time. She would come back to Bernice, but her mother could rarely stay sober long enough to keep her. Bernice knew she couldn't provide for her daughter in a way that would be conducive to the child's development. Her other children had already been taken into society care and made wards of the state.

Bernice didn't want to lose another child. So, selflessly, despite the love she had for Katelynn, she gave her daughter to Donna Irving to care for. She thought her friend would be able to better provide for the seven-year-old girl than she could in her condition. One day she'd get Katelynn back and they'd live together as a family, but in the meantime, Donna could provide the girl with food, shelter, and consistency. That's all Bernice wanted for her daughter — a life outside CAS care where she could grow up and be happy.

Unfortunately, Donna, much like Bernice, had a long history of drug addiction and an extensive criminal record. Because of that, she'd lost custody of two of her own children, who were placed in CAS care. Her partner, Warren Johnson, also had a significant criminal record and had been accused of sexually assaulting his young nieces. The sexual assault allegations were substantiated by the CAS, but the organization didn't pursue Johnson criminally to spare the pain of the victims having to testify. Despite Irving's and Johnson's histories, a judge granted Donna full custody of Katelynn.

It never made sense to me why someone would sanction the placement of Katelynn in the care of a person so clearly dangerous to children. The CAS revealed there were multiple records of neglect and signs of abuse reported to them over the fifteen-month period Katelynn lived with Irving and Johnson. Caseworkers sounded alarms after visits to Irving's home, but no formal action was taken. Katelynn had missed nearly a month of class, and teachers had contacted the CAS about cuts and bruises on the little girl, but the information was always lost somewhere as it travelled between the CAS and Native Child and Family Services, which dealt with Donna's file.

Katelynn was never taken away and placed somewhere safer, even after the reports of missing school days, the bumps and bruises friends and family saw on her, and the knowledge that one of her caregivers was an accused pedophile. Of course, removing children from their homes is traumatizing to them and their entire family. It should only be done when absolutely necessary. But certainly this was one of those situations; removing Katelynn from Donna's home would have helped the little girl and saved her life.

As adults, we tell children we know what's best, that we know how to keep them safe and healthy. They depend on us to make all the major decisions that affect their lives. They trust us to feed them when they're hungry, bring them to

a doctor when they're sick, chase away the monsters lurking beneath their beds. I can only imagine how confused Katelynn must have been when a judge left her in Donna Irving's care, how forgotten she must have felt when caseworkers visited her guardian's residence and left without any actions being taken to protect her from the obvious abuse she suffered.

Katelynn must have thought, *That's how the world works*, that children like her didn't get help when needed, that there was no one to help her. So, of course, she went to school and explained away the bruises and cuts as injuries she got while playing with Irving's sons. The extended absences from school were because she wasn't feeling well. She was *fine*.

The conversations with the CAS were illuminating. Clearly, Katelynn hadn't been in a healthy or safe home environment for quite a while, so it was time for me to inspect the home myself to see what evidence lay waiting to be uncovered. What story would the apartment reveal about what had happened to Katelynn?

While the girl's body was found in Irving and Johnson's apartment, they still had a right to privacy within their own home. Until a search warrant was obtained, no forensic evidence could be collected, nor could a thorough sweep of the apartment take place. As such, the scene was secured by a uniformed officer as we waited for a judge to grant a warrant.

The warrant was filed shortly after Katelynn was pronounced dead. Once secured, I drove to the West Lodge apartment complex to investigate the crime scene. The complex consisted of two fifteen-storey buildings in a crescent formation, each structure facing the other and casting dark shadows on the ground below. I knew this place rather well; it was infamous then and continues to be to this day. Over the years, a number of suspicious deaths have occurred within the West Lodge location, and the residents there are no strangers to police.

The tenants in the complex frequently complained of pests, mould, and other health hazards. Unfortunately, Toronto's housing market is highly inaccessible. An affordable apartment in the city often comes with compromising drawbacks, and West Lodge was riddled with them.

The Irving and Johnson apartment was on the second floor — a two-bedroom with a single bathroom and a balcony. Upon first entering, I was briefed by Detective Hank Idsinga, who was already there. He showed me

through the small apartment, which was well kept. The floors were swept, the sink was clean, and the place was orderly, which surprised me. It seemed principally inconsistent that people who abused their roles as caregivers for a child would take such care in their home. I suppose, however, as much as my Newfoundlander mother would be loath to admit, we can't tell people's morals by the cleanliness of their homes.

Passing through the living room, I came to where Katelynn had been discovered, and that's where the facade of order broke down. In contrast to the bedroom where Irving and Johnson slept, which was kept tidy and comfortable with pillows and thick blankets, there wasn't any form of comfort for Katelynn in her bedroom. The only piece of furniture, if you could call it that, was a hockey net, as the paramedics had noted when they'd rushed into the room. The floor was stained with blood where the girl's body had once been. She'd been transported to the morgue at SickKids Hospital, but an imprint of her remained on the floor in red. On top of the hockey net was a book and a bowl of food. Otherwise, besides a two-by-four of wood, the bedroom was bare. I've seen dogs with nicer and more inviting places to sleep.

There was nothing to indicate that Katelynn lived in the apartment at all — no photos of her, no toys, no drawings pinned on the fridge. The only evidence that the seven-year-old girl lived in the apartment was the presence of her blood. What forensics would confirm as Katelynn's blood was found in every room of the apartment: on the floors, the walls, and the countertops. She had bled everywhere, and Donna Irving had missed cleaning up the evidence of her bleeding more than once.

To find Katelynn's blood, one only had to look hard enough. It faintly speckled the walls, dotted the carpets, and was dried in the cracks of the baseboards. What once appeared to be a tidy, orderly apartment slowly revealed itself to be a chamber of horrors.

What did they do to you? I wondered sadly as I passed through the hallway and noted the dried bloodstain on the wall.

Forensic evidence painted a picture of Katelynn confined in a small linen closet. The amount of blood found within and damage to the closet were consistent with forcible confinement. Katelynn was likely locked in there for hours at a time, and when she was allowed out, she faced endless abuse.

Forensics spent weeks thoroughly inspecting every nook and cranny of the Irving and Johnson apartment. Everywhere they searched, new evidence of Katelynn appeared, including a piece of paper on which the seven-year-old was made to write with her small, swollen hands more than sixty times: "I am an awful girl, and that's why nobody wants me."

Earlier, I conjectured Katelynn had felt alone, as if no one would ever help her. As she was forced to write those horrible lines, it confirmed to the little girl that nobody wanted her, that no one would save her.

The book I saw in Katelynn's room was stained with her blood. In Irving's handwriting on the inside cover was: "Katelynn is the Devil's Kid" — a nasty note to the poor girl from her guardian.

Leaving the apartment that day, I felt sick. I couldn't imagine what sort of physical pain Katelynn had endured or what emotional pain she'd been subjected to alone in that terrible place. It was an eight-hundred-square-foot torture chamber.

It was midmorning by then. The ground was slowly heating up under the August sun climbing higher and higher in the sky with each passing minute. I hadn't slept at all yet, and the bright light burned my tired eyes as I strode to my car parked in front of the West Lodge complex. The interior of the car was hot like an oven, but the shade it provided was welcomed by my retinas. Dabbing the sweat from my brow, I started the engine and pulled away from the crime scene.

On my way out of the driveway, I passed children playing in the greenspace outside. They seemed no older than ten as they chased one another through the grass, cackling with laughter, enjoying the freedom of childhood and the last few weeks of summer break.

I wondered when Katelynn had last felt that free, as if she could run and play without a care in the world, as a child should. My heart felt even heavier.

Katelynn Sampson's death still wasn't a homicide. Her autopsy hadn't been conducted yet, and for all Hank and I knew, she really did choke on chicken soup.

After seeing the state of Katelynn's living conditions and the amount of her blood in the apartment, I was convinced this was a homicide, but there wasn't

enough evidence yet to ground a murder or manslaughter charge. Only when we knew the cause of death could we say for sure that Katelynn's death was a homicide.

Hank and I were monitoring the investigation in anticipation of Katelynn's cause of death stemming from the injuries inflicted upon her. Until such time, however, the officers at 14 Division were conducting their own investigation of the failure-to-provide charge they'd laid on Donna Irving. We were observing their investigation, ready to take it over once the autopsy was complete and the cause of death determined.

A detective at 14 Division was leading the investigation into Donna's failure to provide. He'd found and questioned Bernice Sampson, Katelynn's biological mother, and briefed us on that interview.

Bernice hadn't seen her daughter in a month. She'd tried to arrange visits with her, but each time Donna had told a new lie. At the time, Bernice didn't know Donna was lying. To her, there was no reason why her long-time friend would keep her away from her daughter. After all, Donna had saved Katelynn from foster care as a favour to Bernice. She had Katelynn's best interests at heart, didn't she?

First, Donna told Bernice that Katelynn was ill and not well enough for visitors. Then the excuse was that the girl was away at camp. Other times, Donna said Katelynn was angry at Bernice and didn't want to see her. So Bernice kept her distance, thinking that Donna's family was what was best for her daughter, better than the life she could provide for Katelynn then.

The last time Bernice visited her daughter, she grew concerned about the girl's health. Katelynn's baby face had been whittled down to reveal the hollows of her cheeks. Her body was lean and bony. Maybe she was just getting older, losing baby fat as so many other kids did at that age. But then there were all those bruises.

When Bernice asked Katelynn how she got the bruises, her daughter said she was playing with Donna's boys and got hit in the face. That was the explanation for the purple and blue marks on her cheeks and forehead, something Bernice accepted then. She didn't have any reason to think of worst-case scenarios. After all, Donna was her friend and would make sure no one hurt Katelynn. During that visit, Bernice and her daughter laughed and played. Now, if Bernice could

turn back the clock, she would have dug deeper, asked more questions, and never would have sent her back upstairs to that apartment.

Bernice left 14 Division teary-eyed and brimming with guilt. She'd replay her decision to send Katelynn to live with Donna over and over again for the rest of her life. She thought she was doing what was best for Katelynn; no mother wants to see her child sent away to live with an unknown person in foster care. Bernice believed she was saving her daughter and herself by having Katelynn live with a friend. Bernice figured she could check in on Katelynn frequently, have her stay in her school with her friends, and be confident Donna would look after the girl properly.

For the rest of that week, Bernice wailed inconsolably and wandered aimlessly around Parkdale. She wished she could show Donna Irving the pain she felt; she wanted desperately to do to her friend what the woman had done to her baby girl.

The clock was ticking, and there was still no sign of Warren Johnson, Donna's boyfriend, or his and Donna's two sons. My chief concern was the well-being of those two children. We had constables searching for the father and his boys, but so far they were nowhere to be found.

I was considering hosting a press conference and releasing photos of Johnson and his sons. The more people who saw what they looked like, the more probable someone would recognize them and call us. This was an extreme measure, since children have an increased right to the protection of their privacy. Releasing the two boys' photos would severely compromise their privacy, but I had to weigh that against the possibility such an action could save their lives if they were injured the way Katelynn had been. The state of Katelynn's body and the suffering she'd obviously endured while in Donna's care greatly reduced my confidence that her other children would be found unharmed.

Irving said Johnson had taken the two boys for an outing hours before Katelynn had died, so there was no indication Johnson was home when the girl's injuries were inflicted, nor was there any proof he was even living in the home full-time when Katelynn suffered abuse. While, of course, I had my suspicions about Donna's boyfriend, I couldn't order his arrest until I had more

information. I needed more reason to suspect he had a hand in Katelynn's death beyond the sinking feeling in the pit of my stomach.

As I sat contemplating what to do, tapping my pen against a notebook anxiously, my cellphone rang. It was a call from my partner, Hank Idsinga, who notified me that Warren Johnson had been found by police returning to his and Donna's West Lodge apartment. Johnson agreed to come into 14 Division and speak with me and Hank but never asked why we were searching for him or what we wanted to speak about, which seemed suspicious. Typically, people who have no idea about events that transpired in their absence *ask* why the police want to speak with them. Johnson acted as if he knew already.

A little later, Johnson strode into 14 Division holding the hands of his two sons. He was a tall, broad man with a furrowed brow and a goatee. I breathed a sigh of relief when I saw them. The two boys, aged two and four, seemed happy and healthy. Their hair was brushed, their bodies were plump, and their clothes were neat and tidy. There wasn't a single bruise visible on their bodies.

They were safe.

Johnson told me roughly the same story Donna had shared with constables earlier: he'd taken the boys out the previous night, hadn't been home since, and they were returning to the apartment when police intercepted them. He did add a new detail: the last time he'd seen Katelynn she was sitting on the floor of their bathroom reading a book. That was about five hours before her death.

The interview was short and generally uninformative. Johnson seemed concerned with getting back to his boys and refused to allow us to interview them. Without anything new to base an arrest on, I had to let Johnson and the children leave. I watched them walk out of the glass doors of the division, feeling frustrated that I couldn't do anything more, that I'd let those two little boys leave hand in hand with a man I thought was party to a homicide. There was nothing I could do, though, until the evidence pointed in Johnson's direction, if it ever did.

That evening I drove home exhausted. I needed to catch up on sleep until tomorrow, when the investigation would continue and Katelynn's autopsy was scheduled. As I sat in traffic, I thought about the apartment on West Lodge, the room with the hockey net, the bloodstains on the walls and floors. I thought about Bernice Sampson, the mother who loved her child so much that she tried

to give the girl a better life, even if it meant not being with her daughter. I thought about Donna Irving and her bored silence as she sat across from me in the interview room.

When I finally pulled into my driveway, the sun had already set below the hillside in the backyard. My eyes were heavy and my limbs weak as I dropped my briefcase on the floor of the entryway. I realized I hadn't eaten since before bed the night before the call, so I trudged to the kitchen and scooped dinner out of the pot cooling on the stove. After I took two mouthfuls, I felt sick to my stomach; I was far too anxious to eat. Changing my mind, I left the plate on the countertop and went to bed, hoping sleep wouldn't evade me as it so often did. Rather than the deep, dreamless rest my body yearned for, I found myself in a space between asleep and awake, my mind sorting through Katelynn's case and wondering what tomorrow would bring at the autopsy.

The next morning I drove into the city and parked at SickKids. Once inside, I bought a coffee and sipped it fretfully while waiting for the elevator, attempting unsuccessfully to prepare myself mentally for the autopsy. When the elevator arrived, I entered and watched the numbers climb slowly to the children's morgue where I met Hank.

This would be the first time either of us actually saw Katelynn. I'd heard about the extreme state of her injuries from the paramedics who had attended her and from the officers who had arrived on the scene that night, but I hadn't seen her injuries myself. Her body had been transported to the morgue by the time I reached the crime scene. The first responders' descriptions of Katelynn's wounds did nothing to prepare me for what she really looked like.

When I first saw her, I wanted to cry. I stood in the chilly, tiled room, notebook in hand, shocked at the small body before me. After viewing the injuries myself, I knew there was no way Warren Johnson had seen Katelynn reading on the floor the night of her death. The girl would have been in too much pain. With the number of broken bones she'd sustained, she would have been wholly unable to move, let alone read quietly to herself. For that matter, she couldn't have been eating chicken soup the night she died, as Donna Irving claimed. I doubted she could have eaten at all or even lifted a spoon to her lips.

The pathologist conducting Katelynn's autopsy was Dr. David Chiasson, who specialized in pediatric pathology at SickKids. "Her injuries are consistent

with having been in a high-speed car crash," he said grimly, noting the broken bones and bruising present on her tiny body.

I'd never seen a child in such a state before.

There was a medical fellow working with Chiasson that day, observing and assisting with the autopsy. When she gazed at Katelynn's swollen face, her eyes became glassy. She reached out and clasped Katelynn's hand in her gloved palm. "You're safe now," the fellow whispered from behind her surgical mask. "No one can hurt you anymore." The fellow continued to lightly squeeze Katelynn's fingers, the way a parent would do to reassure a child that everything was going to be all right.

The autopsy proceeded. It was a long process, since every inch of Katelynn's body was injured and each had to be meticulously recorded. The various states of healing of Katelynn's wounds indicated she'd been repeatedly hurt for months — more than seventy wounds in total but none individually fatal. Had she been taken by her guardians for medical treatment, she would have been fine and could have healed. But she'd never received that kind of care. Eventually, over time, the wounds had developed infections, which spread to her blood, causing her to die of septic shock.

Clearly, Katelynn Sampson hadn't died by choking on soup. Nor were her injuries inflicted on a single night. Instead, her death was slow and prolonged, the result of months of torture without access to medical care. It was now official: Katelynn's death was a homicide.

Hank and I didn't say a word to each other following the little girl's autopsy. We walked down the hallway only to the sound of our shoes clicking against the hospital floor. In the dense silence between us, shock, horror, sadness, and all the uncomfortable emotions of despair one could ever feel prevailed. We parted ways to head to our vehicles that day without even saying goodbye. No words were necessary to acknowledge what we both knew, what we'd just witnessed.

When I got into my car, I placed the ignition key in my lap for a moment and closed my eyes. I'm not a particularly religious man, but I whispered a prayer of sorts that wherever Katelynn was now she was at peace and finally felt safe.

Donna Irving would now be charged with murder. That was certain. I theorized she'd beaten and confined Katelynn. But even if she hadn't and

Warren Johnson had been the only aggressor, Donna's neglect *still* caused the girl's death. She'd had a duty as a guardian to protect Katelynn; there was no way Donna couldn't have seen the child's suffering, couldn't have heard her whimpers as Katelynn grew weaker and weaker with each passing day.

Soon, I learned more about Johnson. His story that he'd been away from the apartment the night of Katelynn's death was a bald-faced lie. Security footage from the building showed him leaving with a knapsack and his children, heading out the emergency exit as the ambulance pulled up to the West Lodge apartment complex. His post-offence conduct suggested culpability. He knew Katelynn had died and had run away with his sons, hoping Donna would successfully take whatever blame that came their way. He'd contributed to Katelynn's abuse and had fled when it was time to face the consequences of his actions. As a caregiver for Katelynn, Johnson also had a duty to provide for the child and keep her safe. The girl's injuries were so obvious that even if he hadn't caused them himself, his intentional refusal to take her to a doctor to seek medical help when she was so obviously sick meant he'd contributed to her death.

Katelynn had been taken to a doctor by Bernice Sampson close to one hundred times in her six years of life prior to living with Irving and Johnson. Since staying with them, she hadn't been there once. Katelynn had missed more than thirty days of school in that year's time. Her bouncy ringlets of hair that she loved very much had been shaved down to her scalp as punishment for alleged misbehaviour. The child had endured the pain of countless physical injuries untreated for months.

By the time Donna was granted full custody of Katelynn, the seven-year-old girl had already been subjected to months of pain and trauma. She was seen in school with bruises and scrapes and was growing skinnier and skinnier as she was deprived of food. But the beginning of the worst of her abuse coincided with a letter Donna received from the Ontario government. She and Johnson misinterpreted the letter's meaning. They thought it was written to inform them they would no longer receive financial child-care benefits for Katelynn. That wasn't what the letter said at all, but that didn't matter now. They were convinced that Katelynn's presence in their apartment would no longer provide them with a monetary reward. When they ceased to see any further benefit to Katelynn living with them, or living at all, the abuse intensified. They assaulted

her even more harshly, indifferent to whether she would live or die. If she died, they reasoned, they'd have one less mouth to feed.

And they did. Early in the morning, with broken bones, injured organs, cuts, and bruises, Katelynn died on the floor of that horrible bedroom without a hand to hold or a blanket to keep her warm, without her mother's voice to comfort her.

Then Irving and Johnson hatched a plan. They knew Katelynn's death was a possibility and were both indifferent to her living or dying, but they hadn't planned what to do, what actions to take to cover their tracks when the girl took her last breath. So they schemed quickly. Johnson packed a bag for him and their sons. If the boys were away from the house, they'd be sheltered from the CAS. Irving had already lost too many children to the agency. She would tell the paramedics that Katelynn had choked; they'd buy that, she was sure. So, after a few hours of deliberating and a bottle or two of beer, Irving called 911 while Johnson got ready to take the boys out the emergency exit.

The reader is probably thinking that Irving and Johnson's plan was the worst one ever made. Why wouldn't they just take responsibility for their actions? Their lie was a thin veil that easily revealed the truth, so why lie at all?

After working in Homicide for as long as I did, I know one thing to be true: people who kill other people never plan the perfect cover-up. Murderers frequently fall into two camps. The first includes individuals who are self-obsessed, arrogant, and overconfident. This inflated sense of entitlement leads them to believe no matter what they do they can't be caught. Their lies will be poorly constructed, their evidence poorly hidden, because they think they're superior and capable of outsmarting police and lawyers. They rarely, if ever, are. The second camp consists of murderers who are terrified. The act of taking another human life has damning consequences, legally and literally. The fear, anxiety, anger, frustration, all the animalistic emotions the mind works through after causing another's death, make people act recklessly. The brain can't focus on weaving a perfect lie when all its alarm bells are ringing, urging the body it controls to flee, hide, preserve itself.

At the time, I'm sure Donna Irving and Warren Johnson thought their story was believable. Their ability to step outside themselves and make a "better" plan was impaired by either arrogance or adrenalin. Thank God for that.

Both Irving and Johnson were charged with first-degree murder but pleaded guilty to second degree and were sentenced to life in prison. At her sentencing, Irving cried and begged Bernice Sampson to forgive her. Irving said she saw Katelynn each time she closed her eyes and that the girl she killed would forever haunt her.

I wondered how someone could be sorry for something deliberately done over the course of many months. Why hadn't Irving been repentant in April, May, June, or July? Why couldn't she have stopped hurting Katelynn then? Did she have regrets when she'd declared Katelynn was the devil's child? Did she feel apologetic for locking the girl in a closet night after night? Only now was she begging for forgiveness. I didn't think Irving was sorry at all, only for herself. She only regretted she hadn't gotten away with the pain and suffering she'd caused.

When Bernice strode out of court that day, she had a heavy heart. In some ways, she felt closure: Irving and Johnson could never hurt another child again. But nothing would bring back her baby girl.

To care for a child is an honour, and simultaneously, one of the most demanding responsibilities thrust upon someone. How easy it is to become a parent but how difficult it is to parent a child. Not everyone is afforded the same privileges in our world, such as access to a network to help lessen the weight of caring for a child alone. It takes truly selfless people to realize they can't provide their children with the basic necessities required to thrive. I can't imagine the pain Bernice went through when she made the decision to surrender Katelynn to Irving and Johnson. She'd made the ultimate sacrifice: giving her daughter to someone she felt could care for her better than she was able to.

Bernice had spent months without Katelynn but had hoped one day they'd be reunited, that her daughter would understand why she'd been sent to live with Irving and Johnson. She'd hoped Katelynn would see her action as the best thing once the girl was older. When they were reunited and she was in a better place, Bernice probably reasoned, mother and daughter could pick up where they'd left off.

Donna Irving says she's haunted by Katelynn. I'm certain Bernice badly wishes she could see Katelynn with such ease. She wants nothing more than to

catch a fleeting glimpse of her daughter on a playground or see her smiling face in a dream.

It's been more than thirteen years since Katelynn Sampson's death. I expect not a day goes by that Bernice doesn't think about her baby girl and that smiling little face.

6

Melonie Biddersingh: Cold Case of Horrors

BY NOW, THE READER KNOWS about the all-hours nature of working in Homicide — the late-night calls and long days of work that seemed to bleed into one another. It didn't matter where I was, when my pager buzzed notifying me that a murder victim had been found somewhere in the city, it was my job as the officer in charge to get to the crime scene and start the investigation. Being on call always made me anxious. The presence of my pager on my belt or bedside table always reminded me that somewhere in the city someone had experienced a last meal, a last goodbye to friends and family, a last time seeing the sun set or rise. At some point soon, I'd meet that victim. I just didn't know who it was yet. One thing I did know: that murder victim would never know me, not in life, anyway.

I remembered vividly all the drives I'd taken from my home outside the city to crime scenes. I'd done the trip hundreds of times. Every one was the same — in the dead of night along a poorly lit two-lane highway in the earliest hours of the morning, ruminating on the facts of the case at hand, only the radio to keep me company and the spectre of a homicide victim not yet met. I'd visualize that latest victim as if he or she were sitting beside me, as if glancing at the passenger seat, I could see that person travelling with me as we sped toward a new crime.

In Homicide, I worked around the clock to glean as much information as possible in the most crucial hours of an investigation. I'd return home more than twenty-four hours later in the same wrinkled dress shirt and suit I'd headed out in the previous night. The pace of these investigations was unsustainable, but I ran the marathon — investigation after investigation — for nearly a decade. At some point, this sort of work was all I knew, all I could recall. But it took its toll.

I had to miss my children's soccer games and birthday parties. I worked on Christmas Day and New Year's Eve. The long hours made me move around like a ghost in my own house, dazed and foggy. One day I woke up and realized that time was slipping away from me, my kids were growing up before my eyes, and I couldn't always be there when they needed me. Soon, they'd be grown and I would have missed crucial moments in their young lives. I had spent so much time with the dead that I'd forgotten about the joys of the living. That was when I decided it was time for a change of pace. I needed a career that allowed me to live while I was still alive.

There was an opening in the Homicide Cold Case squad for an officer in charge. I was asked to fill the position, and I immediately agreed to the proposal, hoping to relax my work a little bit, to rest and recover. When there just wasn't enough to solve a homicide — no leads, no witnesses, insufficient evidence — all that pertained to a homicide victim's death was boxed up and filed away in the hope that one day enough information would be available to continue the investigation. Boxes of cold cases waited in purgatory while the families of victims grew older each day without closure. For some it had been decades since the last development in their loved one's case; many died without knowing what had happened to them.

Cold case investigations involve fewer late nights and long hours because they've quite literally gone "cold." There's no heat of an active investigation, no rush to secure a search warrant, find evidence that could otherwise be destroyed, attend an autopsy, or interview witnesses. All that work has already been done to no avail. In filling the cold case position, my job was to search through puzzle pieces collected in a tomb-like case file from a time long since passed, collecting something new from the information or discovering a fresh route down which to take a case.

No more late-night calls; I could be home for holidays and weekends with my family. But the subject matter was equally as dismal as working active investigations. Murder is murder, whether it happened thirty years ago or one minute earlier. Investigating someone's death is a heavy responsibility. I never took it lightly.

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I well remember the day I was first made aware of Melonie Biddersingh's case, though I didn't know her name then. The day started as all my days working cold cases did. I strode into my office and slung my overcoat over my chair. It was still early in the morning. When I worked in active investigations, I sat in an open, collaborative-style office space, with desks clumped together in quads. As the head of the Cold Case unit, I had my own office, a new luxury I wasn't previously accustomed to.

My office was rather small and tucked away in police headquarters, with a carpeted floor and drab grey walls that I tried to dress up with framed pictures, which hung somewhat lopsided. That day, my office window looked out on a grey December streetscape. Visible just across the street was the coroner's office housing the morgue, my least favourite place in Toronto.

I switched on the green-shaded lamp over my desk and dropped my briefcase down. Sinking into my desk chair, I noticed a thin white slip of paper centred on the desktop before me — a fax from Niagara Regional Police.

Pulling my glasses out of my pocket, I perched them at the end of my nose and drew the paper closer. According to the fax, a pastor in the Niagara region had called police to report a strange story he'd heard from one of his parishioners. He was concerned about her safety, as well as that of two of her sons.

Pastor Eduardo Cruz watched as his congregation picked up their purses, slipped on their jackets, and pulled on their hats at the end of an evening service. It was nearing winter, and the sky loomed dark outside the church's windows. As the room began to empty and the sounds of parishioners' car engines igniting in the parking lot could be heard within the building from outside, he noticed a woman lingering. Cruz knew her well — Elaine Biddersingh.

Elaine had been attending the pastor's services for some time now, and Cruz had become familiar with her and her family. He spotted her husband, Everton Biddersingh, a burly, brooding man, lurking at the exit. Everton watched Elaine under his heavy brow. Eventually, he became impatient and shrugged as he left the church to wait in their car. As he stormed outside, Elaine's eyebrows raised observantly. Quickly, she wrapped her scarf around her neck and hurried down the aisle toward the pastor.

"Pastor Cruz, can I speak with you, please? It's my husband …"

It wasn't uncommon for Elaine to approach the pastor to share something concerning her tumultuous relationship with her husband, or for the pastor to do the same. Cruz felt as if he was constantly in the middle of their fights, but as a pastor he and his church sought to be a pillar for their community to lean on during tough times. Some families had more of those than others, the Biddersinghs especially.

The church had frequently loaned the Biddersinghs money for rent, brought them food in times of scarcity, and most recently, the pastor had become Elaine and Everton's marriage counsellor. The couple had bitter disagreements about Elaine's use of marijuana and about Everton's micromanagement of the family's finances and his habitual unemployment. They could get quite spiteful with each other. Sometimes Cruz wondered if he were even capable of advising such a miserable pair toward a relationship that resembled happiness.

Now, as he stepped down from the altar, Cruz suggested they speak in his office. So Elaine took his arm and they strolled through the tiny church to the stairwell that led to the pastor's office in the basement. There was a nervous energy about her, different from the usual forceful personality Cruz had become accustomed to.

Once downstairs, the pastor settled into the chair behind his desk in the small office he shared with the other parish pastors. Elaine sat across from him, clutching her handbag tightly in front of her and glancing uneasily at the office door.

Cruz folded his hands on the desk. "So, what's bothering you, Elaine?"

There was a long pause of absolute silence. Cruz figured the woman was struggling with herself, as if thinking, *Should I say what I have to say or not?*

Finally, she said, "We didn't always have three children. There used to be more."

Cruz chuckled nervously. "More? Have they grown up and moved away?"

Elaine's ominous gaze cut his insecure laughter short. "They never grew up. Dead. Neither made it past seventeen." Her words hung weightily in the office.

"Oh …" Cruz didn't know they'd lost a child. "I'm so sorry … the passing of a loved one can be very painful, especially when it's your child."

"It was *his* fault," Elaine blurted, cutting him off. She glanced at the ceiling with contempt. Above them, Everton's car idled in the parking lot.

Elaine proceeded to tell the pastor that two of her children had died. One of them fell off the balcony of an apartment when they lived in Toronto nearly twenty years ago. She thought Everton had something to do with it, that it wasn't an accident, that he'd thrown their son off the balcony. The police attended the death of their boy and recorded the incident as a suicide, but Elaine never believed her son had jumped. The other child had died shortly after the first. As she came to this part of her story, Elaine tugged at the edges of her purse. The second child had been seventeen. Elaine was sure the teen had starved to death because her husband never fed her. If Elaine tried to give their daughter food, Everton hit her. When the teen died, he put her in a green suitcase, wheeled it to his car, drove it far away, and burnt everything to destroy the evidence. No one knew the girl had died — not the police, not their friends or family. She simply disappeared.

"Jesus help us," Elaine whispered at the end of her story, meeting the pastor's gaze with an intense stare of her own.

Cruz had seen many parents struggle over a child's passing; it was the sort of thing a community spiritual leader encountered. He had supported many families as they mourned, stood by them and watched as a small casket was lowered into the cold, dark earth, innocents who had but a split second of existence, now blanketed in eternal sleep. The pastor couldn't imagine how anyone could murder their *own* child. Sitting before Elaine, he felt goosebumps prickle the back of his neck.

The pastor asked his parishioner if she was sure what she was saying was true. This wasn't a matter that could be kept private like the mundane issues and arguments that popped up in marriage counselling. She was alleging that her husband had killed two of their children, including a daughter no one knew had been murdered. The police had to be notified and an investigation begun.

"Oh yes, Pastor. I saw it myself. Go ahead and call them."

Soon, Everton's booming voice echoed above them, calling Elaine's name loudly. Then they heard heavy feet descend the stairs to the basement.

"Don't tell him I told you this," Elaine whispered hurriedly.

Cruz barely had time to nod when the doorknob twisted and the door swung open, revealing Everton taking up the entire doorway.

Elaine's husband complained that he'd been wasting gas idling in the parking lot and demanded to know what was taking so long, why Elaine had stayed to speak with the pastor. Cruz knew Everton didn't like his family members to be alone unless he could keep an eye on them.

"I was talking to the pastor about Jesus," Elaine said, then stood and slung her handbag over her shoulder. "Good night, Pastor Cruz."

While she walked past her husband and out the doorway, Everton lingered for a moment to survey the room. Then he nodded curtly at Cruz and followed his wife out of the office and through the church.

The pastor sat stunned in his office, waiting apprehensively as he prayed that he wouldn't hear Everton's footsteps return down the stairs. Cruz feared what the man would do if he found out what Elaine had told him. If Everton was capable of hurting his own children, he was certainly able to injure his pastor. Cruz listened intently until he heard a car rumble to a start and roll out of the church parking lot. Then his hand, almost acting by itself, found its way to the phone on a corner of the desk. He picked it up and called the Niagara Regional Police.

After hearing Cruz's uneasy retelling of Elaine's bizarre story, the Niagara police invited him to the station to be properly interviewed. They recorded his conversation, then sent me the fax now on my desk. The Niagara police believed this information could possibly relate to a homicide that had taken place in Toronto in the early 1990s.

My first instinct as a detective was to treat each tip sent my way with a degree of caution. Many years of inaccurate information provided by well-meaning but sometimes misinformed community members had dulled my ability to feel hope. As a young detective, I might have felt the stirrings of excitement when presented with a secret story like the one told by Pastor Cruz, but I'd become calloused with experience. The story made me suspicious, but I needed to know more.

Cruz didn't mention the names of the children allegedly murdered by their father, just that one had fallen off a balcony in Toronto and that the other's death was never reported. All that was certain were the names of Cruz's

parishioners, Elaine and Everton Biddersingh. This was information I could use to dig deeper. According to the story, the boy's death was attended by Toronto Police as a suicide; whether that was true or not was easy to confirm.

I started the computer on my desk and watched it reluctantly blink to life. It was old and outdated technology, but I'd never been able to keep pace with modern innovation, so for me it was just fine. After giving the computer a moment to awaken, I took to the keyboard, querying police records, searching for a trace of Elaine and Everton Biddersingh that could substantiate the claims in the pastor's story.

Sure enough, I quickly found a suicide occurrence confirming that Dwayne Biddersingh, son of Everton Biddersingh and stepson of Elaine Biddersingh, fell more than twenty floors to his death in the early 1990s. This tragedy happened at an apartment complex in the Parkdale neighbourhood of Toronto. He was only thirteen years old at the time. In my experience, it's very rare for a thirteen-year-old to die by suicide. I had attended many suicides while in uniform but had never heard of a child throwing himself voluntarily from a balcony. Perhaps someone had pushed him. This discovery gave Elaine's story more credibility. She'd been telling at least some of the truth to her pastor.

According to the information in the occurrence, five other children lived in the home the day Dwayne died, including a teenage girl named Melonie Biddersingh, Dwayne's biological sister. Their father was Everton. Their mother, Opal Austin, lived more than eighteen hundred miles away in Jamaica. Elaine's story said that Everton had starved their daughter, then disposed of the body. *Could this be the girl allegedly set ablaze in a suitcase?* I wondered.

Perhaps it was, or maybe there never was a suitcase. I had to further confirm the pastor's story about a burning suitcase stuffed with human remains. If it was ever found by anyone, it would have likely been reported in the news.

I asked one of the clerks who worked with me to search for news articles discussing unidentified females found in suitcases. Her cursory look at Toronto news sources revealed no burnt suitcases with human remains discovered in the city between 1990 and 1999. But she expanded the quest, extending the parameters to outside the GTA — and she located something!

News pieces from York Region in September 1994 reported that, during the early hours of the morning, an officer patrolling an industrial park spotted

flames and smoke coming from a corner of an empty parking lot. He got to the fire in time to douse it and found a charred green suitcase. Inside was the small body of a human female. Subsequent news articles revealed that the girl in the suitcase was never identified. Could she be Melonie Biddersingh?

I called York Regional Police who confirmed the existence of an unidentified female in a suitcase in 1994. They had been trying to identify her for nearly twenty years but had no luck. No one ever came looking for the girl.

While the suitcase containing the female had been found in York Region, the homicide was committed in Toronto, if the rest of Pastor Cruz's tip was accurate, and at this point I had no reason to believe it wasn't. That meant the Cold Case unit would be responsible for investigating the deaths.

I needed to speak to Pastor Cruz, who agreed to meet me at Toronto Police Headquarters on a chilly day in December. He was a short, stocky man with cheeks flushed red from the cold winter weather. Shaking my hand firmly, he gave me a warm smile. "I'm worried, Detective," he admitted. "I've been up at night thinking about this."

As he said this, I noticed pale-purple patches under his weary eyes. The poor man was burdened with the weight of a crime he hadn't committed. This dark sort of knowledge of an awful secret carried alone can wreak havoc on a person. Clearly, Cruz was suffering with the burden of Elaine Biddersingh's confession.

He'll carry this with him for the rest of his life, I thought. The pastor was suddenly caught in the middle of a homicide investigation, tormented by the story of the deaths of two children and the knowledge that he'd known their killer for many years and never perceived who the man truly was. There was no reason for him to ever think he would be in this predicament. He was a God-fearing man who gave to charity and prayed before bed each night and kept the company of good, respectable people. But homicide investigations touch everyone. They carve their scars into all of us, even the most innocent of witnesses like Pastor Cruz.

Upstairs, in a quiet interview room, the two of us sat at a round table. Cruz explained that it was church policy to report all violence. It was something he was trained to do when learning to counsel married couples. "I have to admit," he said sadly, "that in all my years I've never heard of violence such as this."

I encouraged him, as hard as it might be, to tell the story to me again. He explained he'd known Elaine for quite a while, had helped her family through personal and financial struggles, and had counselled her and Everton in their marriage. He then recounted all the details of the statement he'd given Niagara Regional Police, which I already knew, the gist being that Elaine had told him she thought her husband was responsible for the deaths of two of her stepchildren, Dwayne and Melonie Biddersingh.

Cruz sighed as he told me that the secret Elaine had revealed to him clarified a lot about the family dynamic in the Biddersingh household. Everton rarely left her alone, and when he did, he demanded to know what had been said in his absence. Elaine had further exposed in counselling sessions that Everton even watched their grown children obsessively and wouldn't let them go to the bathroom without standing outside the door.

The pastor raised a finger knowingly. "He has a secret. He wants to protect it."

I walked the pastor out of police headquarters that day and watched as he strode out onto College Street, pulling his jacket close to his body and holding his hat closer to his head against the icy wind. I knew the next step in this investigation was to speak to Elaine Biddersingh to get the necessary answers to fill in the details of this second-hand story. A meeting had to be scheduled with her, but it had to take place secretly.

The pastor's story painted Everton Biddersingh as a violent, domineering man. If he had, in fact, killed his own children, he might strike against Elaine or his other sons if provoked. It was in Elaine's and her family's best interests for Everton to be wholly unaware of Elaine's communication with police.

I arranged a team to covertly transport Elaine to meet me at police headquarters. Detectives picked her up from a secondary location under the pretense she was running errands in her hometown of St. Catharines. She drove to the pickup location and met an unmarked car that gave her safe passage to Toronto. Everton had no idea where his wife was when she marched into the lobby of police headquarters that day.

Elaine and I met in an interview room, much like the one I'd spoken to Pastor Cruz in. The woman before me appeared meek and fidgety as she settled into her chair, folding her dark sunglasses, placing them carefully in her purse,

and unwrapping the scarf around her neck. At the time, I thought Elaine was brave to risk retaliation from an abusive husband to share her harrowing story.

Interviewing a witness is always unpredictable. There have been many homicides I've investigated in which witnesses suddenly became suspects. As investigators, we never know what witnesses will say or what their involvement in crimes might be. Years of conducting interviews had taught me to ensure the witnesses I spoke to knew their rights ahead of time. I didn't know exactly what Elaine Biddersingh was going to tell me; it could be anything. I only had a second-hand portion of her story from her pastor to go on at that point. From what I'd heard, Elaine wasn't the one who had starved Melonie, nor had she participated in the disposal of the teen's body. But she could have. Out of an abundance of caution, I warned her she might be charged with homicide, failure to provide the necessaries of life, or indignity to a dead body. I also gave her the opportunity to talk to a lawyer. She nodded understandingly.

"Before we go further, would you like anything to drink?" I asked. "A glass of water perhaps?"

"No, thank you, Detective. I'm fasting." She waved her hand to dismiss the offer.

I could see a small Bible sticking out of the open mouth of the purse she'd hung on the back of her chair. "I have to tell you that I admire your bravery in coming today to share your story. I know it's a difficult thing to do, and I empathize with the pain you must have felt over the years, knowing this and being too afraid to speak."

"I've got nothing to hide. Jesus knows the truth of my story. My husband is a truly wicked man. I must wear these long sleeves to cover my bruises." She gestured to her arms and the sleeves that extended to her knuckles.

At that moment I felt sorry for her.

Elaine then looked at me earnestly with big, panicked eyes. "Can you promise me I won't be charged? If I keep telling you what I have to say, that I won't be put away? Can I get that in writing?"

I shook my head. "I can't promise you anything. I'm not even sure what it is you have to say. You don't have to talk to me, but it sounds as if you've got a heavy heart."

"I just don't want to be charged. I didn't do anything. I was just a wife doing my job as a wife. It's true that Melonie died and that someone is responsible for her death, but I can't say anything unless I have some reassurance I won't be charged."

"I'm sorry, Mrs. Biddersingh, but that's just not possible."

I couldn't guarantee her freedom when for all I knew she was the one who had committed the crimes. Although she was visibly nervous, she didn't want to leave. She was free to exit whenever she wanted, and I told her she could several times. Nevertheless, she remained seated.

People talk, even if it's against their best interests, when their consciences are troubled. Guilt requires an outlet. The guilt that had built up in Elaine Biddersingh for almost twenty years demanded to be set free. Nobody can keep a secret forever. They fester and beg to be released.

"Tell me more about the children," I prompted.

More of her story flowed out. Everton Biddersingh had three children with other women before leaving Jamaica to immigrate to Canada. Their names were Dwayne, Melonie, and Cleon. Everton and Elaine were married for a while and living in Toronto in an apartment in Parkdale with their two infant sons when he abruptly decided to bring his children in Jamaica to Canada to be with his family there. But Elaine and Everton's apartment was small and they were always short of money. Everton was regularly unemployed. When the stepchildren arrived, they were quickly a family of seven — Everton, Elaine, their two young sons, Melonie, Dwayne, and Cleon — squeezed into a tiny space with barely enough food to go around. Everton took out his frustration on the three children he'd moved from Jamaica to live with them. He watched every grain of rice they ate. In times of scarcity, he let them go hungry, ensuring his and Elaine's sons were fed first. Elaine found refuge at her mother's house in Toronto. Her mother would cook for her and give her a comfortable bed to sleep in when times got rough, but the children had no escape.

Elaine paused in her recitation, going blank as she stared ahead unblinkingly. It was as if she'd slipped away to another time in her mind, recalling her two stepchildren when they were still alive, as if she could see them as they boarded the plane to come to Toronto, leaving their mothers behind in Jamaica in search of a new life their father had promised. She could picture

Dwayne and Melonie excitedly peering out the airplane window next to their half-brother, Cleon, pointing at the clouds below, laughing at one another. It was like a dream, but one that rapidly turned into a nightmare. From the moment the children stepped off the plane at Pearson International, they were doomed. Everton never enrolled them in school, they were seldom taken to see doctors, not a soul knew they existed, the world forgot about them.

Everton said the Jamaican children couldn't be trusted because they grew up without money. He made them work hard to earn their keep in the home and never showed them any kindness. Melonie was treated like a live-in nanny and maid. The girl wasn't allowed to leave the house and worked from sunrise to sunset cleaning and caring for the younger children. Her brother, Dwayne, was allowed to leave the apartment only to deliver the *Toronto Sun* on a paper route. When he returned, he had to give his pay directly to Everton. Elaine didn't say much about Cleon, the only one of her stepchildren still alive.

One day, Elaine said, Dwayne didn't come home from his newspaper deliveries. He ran away to a friend's house, someone he'd met during his brief moments of freedom delivering papers door to door. Everton was furious as Elaine had never seen him before. *No one disobeyed him like that*. As the sun set, he grew even angrier. The family went to sleep on edge as Everton marinated in his own rage. The following morning, Elaine accompanied her husband and Cleon to find the boy.

Dwayne had stayed at his friend's place overnight. Everton found him quickly by asking neighbours if they'd seen the child. The boy was woken up by his father's big fist pounding on the friend's door. Dwayne knew it was too late. He was caught. In the car home, Everton screamed at the boy and said he'd teach him a lesson. He got Cleon to clear the living room furniture away as soon as they were home so Everton had space to properly beat his son. Elaine said she didn't see anything after that, taking refuge in her bedroom with her baby, but she heard Melonie let loose with a shrill scream. Dwayne had gone over the balcony.

"And what about Melonie?" I pressed.

"After Dwayne died, Everton refused to let Melonie eat. He locked her in a broom closet, and sometimes she went days without seeing sunlight. I'm sure she starved to death, but I don't really know."

"Did you ever hear her cry?" I asked.

"She never made a sound — quiet as a mouse."

"So what happened when Melonie passed away?"

"Everton said we couldn't call for help. He said the police would think we killed her. So he got rid of Melonie himself. I saw a man on TV putting a body in a suitcase, so maybe I suggested he do that. I can't remember for sure now."

"So he put Melonie in a suitcase?" I asked to confirm again what she'd told me.

Elaine nodded. "Then I drove with Everton, Cleon, and my baby son somewhere. Everton and Cleon got out of the car with the suitcase, and a few minutes later they came back and we drove home." She studied her hands as if reliving that moment. "We burned all of Melonie's photos, clothing, and belongings that night."

No one ever came looking for Melonie because no one knew she was missing. Melonie and her siblings had never attended school and didn't have a family physician. The teen was a forgotten child. The only people who remembered her, besides her siblings, had "buried" her.

Elaine pursed her lips, then said, "That's all I have to say."

She had liberated the story trapped inside her. Did the guilt subside once it was set free? I'll never know for certain, but I imagine no amount of emotional release could assuage the remorse of knowing two children in your care had died.

I stood to shake Elaine's hand as she rose from her chair, then let an officer escort her out of the building and to a car that drove her back to St. Catharines. Once she was gone, I let out a deep sigh, feeling the weight of her words as I replayed them in my head. What a strange woman Elaine Biddersingh was. While telling me her terrible story, she had frequently crossed herself reverently and also carried a Bible in her purse. I wondered if the fear in her shaky voice had more to do with dread that her husband might find out she'd spoken with me, or if she'd related the sordid details of what had happened to ensure her own self-preservation from prosecution.

It might seem odd that I didn't arrest Elaine after she admitted to helping her husband and Cleon dispose of Melonie. After all, I had cautioned her before she spoke with me. However, there was still no way to prove Elaine was telling the truth. False confessions aren't uncommon in my line of work. Elaine had

told me a story consistent with something she could have seen on the news twenty years ago, something she decided to replicate in the interview room that day. I had to prove that Melonie was the girl in the suitcase, then the evidence would be sufficient to justify restricting Elaine's liberty.

After my interviews with Eduardo Cruz and Elaine Biddersingh, I knew I had to learn more about the girl found in the burning suitcase in 1994. My team was able to locate the original autopsy report conducted in the days following the discovery of the body. A lengthy note was appended to it written by a forensic anthropologist who specialized in analyzing skeletal remains. The autopsy report revealed a horrific story.

The remains found in York Region belonged to a young female, perhaps seventeen or eighteen years old. However, examining her without an expert eye, one might think she was eight to ten. The girl in the suitcase was impossibly small for her age, weighing only fifty pounds, far below what she should have given her height of approximately five feet. Clearly, the girl hadn't been eating prior to her death; her body had no fat stores. She was entirely bone.

The girl had numerous injuries, too. Well over twenty fractures were identified all over her body — femurs, pelvis, ribs, and hands. These fractures had been in the process of healing at the time of her death. Some were months old, others much newer than that. In the expert opinion of the forensic anthropologist, due to the extreme number of fractured bones, the girl was likely in so much pain prior to her death that she would have been unable to move.

The report compared the girl's injuries to that of a traumatic car crash or a fall from a considerable height but couldn't rule out other possible causes such as blunt force trauma. There was no evidence that any of these injuries had been attended to by a doctor at any time.

While reading the report, I thought back to Katelynn Sampson, the only other case I'd had worked on in which a child's body was so badly injured that doctors compared the damage to that found in vehicular collisions. I shook my head.

Elaine Biddersingh claimed that while living in their small one-bedroom apartment with their family of seven, she never heard Melonie cry out for help.

In fact, she said she didn't really know why her stepdaughter had died. Perhaps, she'd suggested, it was from lack of food.

If the girl in the suitcase was, indeed, Melonie, it would have seemed obvious to any reasonable observer why the teen had died, and starvation likely wasn't the cause. She would have been so clearly suffering that she would have barely been able to move in the weeks leading up to her death. *How could Elaine not see her suffering? How could she not hear her cries?*

Surely, in a one-bedroom apartment, Elaine would have seen Melonie daily and noticed her battered body at some point. Obviously, she hadn't told me the whole story.

But perhaps the girl found in York Region wasn't Melonie. There was still no way for me to confirm her identity. Although Elaine's story was consistent enough with the details of the unidentified female for me to believe she was probably Melonie, I couldn't be certain.

There was one simple way to get to the bottom of the girl's identity: DNA analysis. A DNA swab from a relative compared to the DNA from the girl found in the suitcase would definitively answer whether the girl was indeed Elaine's stepdaughter. Unfortunately, Melonie's relatives in Canada couldn't assist in her identification. Elaine wasn't Melonie's biological mother, so her DNA was of no use to confirm the identity of the remains discovered in 1994. Melonie's only fully biological sibling who had lived in Canada, Dwayne, had died in Parkdale more than twenty years ago and was buried. Everton, her father, was too risky to request a DNA sample from. If he knew we were investigating the disappearance of his daughter, he could potentially harm Elaine, his sons, even Pastor Cruz.

That left one person: Opal Austin. Opal was the mother of Melonie and Dwayne Biddersingh and lived in Kingston, Jamaica. Not only could Opal's DNA confirm Melonie's identity, but I was certain she might have information essential to fill in the gaps of the stories of Melonie and Dwayne.

The Jamaican Constabulary located Opal Austin for us. She was still living in Kingston, with her daughter, Racquel, Melonie and Dwayne's younger sister. Opal told the officers who spoke with her that she believed Melonie was still alive and had run away years ago to live in the United States. She believed her daughter had been studying there in school and had never returned home. Opal hadn't seen Melonie in two decades. So we arranged a meeting with Opal

through the Jamaican Constabulary. She didn't know what the exact reasons for the meeting were, just that we wanted to speak to her about Melonie. Sensitive news such as the possibility of a daughter's death is always best delivered in person.

In mid-February, I scheduled a trip to Jamaica to speak with Opal Austin. Most Torontonians coveted an escape, no matter how brief, from the frigid February air that blew through Toronto relentlessly. But as I stepped off the plane in Kingston, setting my eyes on swaying palm trees and blue skies, I experienced no comfort in being away from the cold. The beautiful weather felt improper considering the dismal purpose of my trip. Striding out of the airport terminal to a dark, thundering storm would have felt more appropriate.

My partner, Keith Bradshaw, and I were met just outside arrivals by members of the Jamaican Constabulary, who drove us to our hotel for the evening. We were to interview Opal at the Canadian High Commission the following afternoon.

That night I struggled to sleep, anxious about our meeting with Opal the next day. I lay on my back, staring at the ceiling fan as it revolved overhead. Then I got up, paced around the shadowy hotel room, and perched on the windowsill above the humming air conditioner to gaze out over the busy city glowing with life. It always comforted me to see other people going about their everyday business when I was panicking. Seeing people so calm and free promenading arm in arm down the street or listening to their car radios in traffic relaxed my restless mind.

I wondered what Opal was doing at that moment. She was probably tossing and turning as well, wondering what Keith and I were going to tell her tomorrow, no doubt thinking about Melonie, her lost daughter. Likely, my visit was also provoking memories of Dwayne, painful ones of the son she'd lost to suicide. Now she would experience loss all over again if her DNA confirmed that it was Melonie who had been found in York Region all those years ago.

For her sake, I hoped the DNA didn't match. Perhaps Melonie really did run away to America to live a life far from her abuser, and the tale Elaine had told me was just that, a story concocted out of spite for her husband with whom she fought constantly and bitterly. A tale crafted to get Everton in trouble and

out of her hair. Of course, that was a fantasy. The chances of the girl in the suitcase being Opal's daughter were quite high, considering all the evidence collected thus far. I sent a silent wish into the night for Opal to get a good, restful sleep before her whole world was turned upside down a second time. Then I lay down and stared at the dark ceiling once more until morning sunlight spilled through the window announcing a new day.

As Keith and I stepped outside the hotel that morning, I felt my collared shirt cling to my neck in the humidity. Glancing at Keith, I noticed sweat beading on his bald head. The air made it feel as if we were wading through soup that day as we waited for our lift to fetch us to our meeting with Opal. I felt jumpier by the minute, thinking about the likelihood of having to tell a mother truly terrible news about a daughter she thought was alive. When the car arrived, my anxiety only increased. We were then driven to the Canadian High Commission, a large multi-windowed building surrounded by a tall fence. A Canadian flag waved outside in the soft breeze, welcoming us.

Inside, I met Opal, a stout woman with cropped grey hair and a warm smile. I imagined she'd run through all number of scenarios concerning why we were there, why we needed to speak to her. Perhaps she was worried that Melonie was in trouble or that she'd been hurt in some way. I wondered if her wildest imagination had allowed her to ponder what we were about to say: that her daughter had probably been dead for years. As we shook her hand and exchanged initial pleasantries, I could tell she was getting impatient. Surely, the suspense was killing her, as it was me.

"Now, Detectives," she asked, "why did you want to meet with me?"

Did she know what she was asking us to tell her? I thought.

Outside I remained calm, but inside I winced. No part of my job was particularly joyful, but death notification was by far among the grimmest parts of the job description. Even after a decade in my line of work, being the herald of bad news never got easy. Hearing the cries, the pleading, the prayers, seeing people's bodies give out from under them when they learned of their children's deaths broke my heart every time. It was as if I were getting the news myself. The worst part was there was nothing I could do to ease their pain. No amount of sympathy could fill the void of a child lost to the cruelty of the world.

I steeled myself for what was to come, as if bracing for the impact of a car crash, then took a deep breath. "Ms. Austin, we have reason to believe your daughter, Melonie, may have been the victim of a homicide in 1994. We hope you'll be willing to provide us with a DNA sample to confirm the identity of a victim we suspect might be Melonie. I'm so sorry to have to tell you this."

Opal blinked in disbelief, staring at me, then at Keith, then back at me again. "No, not my Melonie. She's in the United States. Everton told me she was in America!" She staggered to a nearby seat as if punched in the stomach, then wailed shrilly and clutched her chest as if her heart were about to fail. "Please, no … I've been looking for her every day."

Keith and I then escorted Opal to a sterile white room in the High Commission where she could have a glass of water and rest. She showed us a picture of Melonie that she kept in her pocket, taken some time before the girl left for Toronto. The edges of the photograph were worn, and the picture was faded so much that you could barely make out the teen's features. She stood in a white dress, only thirteen years old, tall and smiling at the camera with a toothy grin. The photo was creased from many years of unfolding and folding.

"I show this to the tourists when they come to town." Opal patted the photograph affectionately. "I ask if they've seen her, my girl." She dabbed her eyes.

Most people answered Opal's questioning honestly — they hadn't seen her daughter. Others, too kind to refuse a gentle woman with sad eyes, said they might have recognized Melonie.

"I thought I'd find her one day, that she'd come back to me. Maybe she just wasn't ready to see me again after I sent her to live with her dad. I was foolish to believe that."

Opal had five other children to take care of and limited resources as a single parent. Despite all the difficulties she faced in her life, she searched every day to find her lost Melonie in the only way she knew how. I admired that about her.

"Can you tell me more about Melonie, Dwayne, and their father?" I asked. From the expression on her face, I sensed Everton might be as touchy a subject as her two deceased children.

Opal continued to stare at the photo of Melonie, quietly sniffling as she wiped tears from her eyes. Then she nodded and tucked the photograph into a

pocket and told us how she first met Everton Biddersingh.

He was a handsome electrician she noticed while he was working on a jobsite on the road on which Opal lived with her mother and father. Everton finally asked her on a date after days of her walking by to say hello. From there an infatuation bloomed. They began to go out together regularly and got to know each other's families. A few years later they moved into their first home and started a family of their own. Opal felt she was in a dream, but Everton had fooled her. Shortly after Melonie was born, his loving and caring nature melted away to reveal a monster.

Her husband now watched Opal's every move. She noticed him following her on her trips to the market or as she visited her mother, who lived close by. Repeatedly, he accused her of infidelity. When she denied the accusations, he hit her relentlessly. He didn't even moderate his violence in front of their children. This prompted Opal's stepfather to take Melonie, their first-born, away from their home for a time. But Opal was left with her abuser, enduring his torment daily. Soon she was pregnant again. Their second child, Dwayne, was welcomed into their unhappy home.

Everton had always been an unreliable partner and parent. Sometimes he stayed with Opal and her children for weeks at a time, other times he simply disappeared, flying north to Canada to visit family. Then one day he left them for good without any warning. The children were very young when he packed his bags and headed north. Later, she learned he'd received a letter from one of his lovers in Canada who was expecting a child and wanted him there to provide for the baby and her. So Everton headed north.

Opal was left alone, a single mother with two children. The hardship of caring for two youngsters with only the meagre wages of a roadside vendor was much preferable to the pain Everton had inflicted upon her and their family for years. She raised Dwayne and Melonie happily. They didn't have very much, but the children had the love of their family and a strong community to support them as they grew from babies to children.

The next time she saw Everton, the kids were grown. Melonie was nearly thirteen, Dwayne ten. Her ex-husband was visiting Jamaica, as he often did, with his new wife and their two children. He knocked on Opal's door one day with a grand plan, saying he wanted to give Dwayne and Melonie a better life, to

make up for all the time he'd been absent as a father. Everton argued that the three of them living in a single-room house in Kingston was unsuitable. He could take care of their children in Canada, had a nice apartment there, and a wife to take care of the kids. He believed there was more opportunity for them in Toronto. Everton also went to Cleon's mother with the same proposition. She agreed, and soon Opal did, too, thinking her children were fortunate to have a second chance at a relationship with their father.

Opal believed Dwayne, a gregarious young boy with a talent for music, would find a better education suited to his musical talents in Canada. And Melonie, a soft-spoken girl with dreams of becoming a nurse, would better achieve her dreams if she left Kingston for Toronto. The children were excited about the adventure.

For a while, she believed Everton had changed. He had settled down, gotten married, and had two children with his new wife, Elaine. Perhaps he was ready now to be a family man and a good father to their kids.

She waved goodbye to her children tearily from the departure lounge of the airport, watching as her first babies boarded the plane with the visions Everton painted for them of a dazzling new Canadian life.

For a while, she called her children weekly from a pay phone outside her home, but soon Everton complained that the phone bills were getting too high with long-distance calling. After that, she no longer spoke to her children, received letters only, and talked to Everton every now and then. He assured her the children were busy studying and didn't have time to speak with her. Months passed like that and soon contact between Opal and her kids diminished to nothing. Each day she wished they'd call, but no one ever did. Weeks turned into months, months into years, without hearing the comforting sound of her children's voices, without knowing they were okay.

Opal didn't hear from Everton again until Dwayne's death several years later. He called to tell her with complete nonchalance that their thirteen-year-old son had fallen from the balcony of their apartment. The police concluded it was a suicide. He hung up the phone and left Opal to grieve alone. She'd barely processed the news before the phone clicked and the dial tone sounded. Everton didn't even sound upset. Opal cried every night for years, still sobbed thinking about Dwayne and the man he never got to become.

A year after her son's death, Everton came to Jamaica with Elaine and their children but not Melonie. He was visiting friends in her neighbourhood when Opal saw him and his family. When she asked where Melonie was, he told her coolly that their daughter had run away, probably to the United States. He knew she had friends there. All he knew for sure was that she was gone.

Opal was concerned but trusted Melonie's judgment. She was a smart girl who knew her own heart. If she believed she needed to leave to start a new life somewhere else, she knew what was best for herself. Before Opal left that day, Everton made a strange but specific request, that Opal burn every letter she'd received from either of her children while in Everton's care. Opal did as he bid but never asked why.

"Did he show any signs of remorse?" I asked. "Like he'd done anything wrong when you saw him then?"

"It was like he had no emotions," she said hollowly. "None."

When Opal was finished her story, we administered the DNA test, a simple swab on the inside of Opal's cheek. Then we sealed the swab in an evidence bag to be taken promptly back to the Centre of Forensic Sciences for sequencing upon our return to Toronto. We watched her leave, that day, through the front doors of the High Commission, the photo of Melonie still tucked away safely in a pocket. She'd thanked Keith and me before she departed, out of politeness, I suppose. Otherwise I couldn't imagine why.

We had hurt her all over again. Already she'd been tormented by Melonie's disappearance and Dwayne's strange death, but those wounds had somewhat healed after almost two decades. The possible news I brought with me to Kingston had sliced open old scars. The possibility of ever finding Melonie had likely vanished. The next time I saw Opal in person was at the trial for her daughter's homicide, years after the moment I observed her stride away from the High Commission with a cloud of sorrow over her.

Keith and I left the High Commission after Opal and headed back to our hotel. The next morning, we boarded our flight to Toronto and took our seats, the DNA swab wrapped in an evidence bag in Keith's carry-on, wedged safely between us. The plane was filled with happy, sunburnt tourists wearing souvenir T-shirts and sandals, chatting about the fun they'd on their tropical getaways and complaining about how cold the February air would feel when we landed.

The backpacks and purses they stowed below their seats held novelty keychains and magnets to give to friends as tokens of their travels. I glanced grimly at the bag that sat securely between Keith and me and thought how different its contents were — crucial evidence in a murder investigation.

The flight was incredibly protracted, as if time advanced at half the normal speed. As one hour faded into the next, I became more impatient, looking out my window at the endless, unchanging cloudscape. All I could think of was the possible results of Opal's DNA test.

After what seemed like an eternity, the captain announced on the PA system that we'd soon be landing. As the plane descended slowly and Toronto came into view below, I felt as if I couldn't sit in my seat any longer. I was too impatient to learn if Opal's DNA matched that of the girl found in the suitcase.

Opal was probably experiencing the same emotions I was. By now, she'd started her workday outside in the heat of a Kingston afternoon, no doubt thinking about Melonie. *Was her daughter out there somewhere? Had she simply chosen an American life?* Surely, Opal would have preferred the pain of Melonie rejecting her than the alternative: her daughter gone forever.

After a bumpy landing, Keith and I were finally home under familiar sullen February skies. We disembarked and passed through customs, parting ways in the damp parking garage at Pearson Airport. I waved goodbye to him as he moved hastily through the garage, the bag holding Opal's DNA tucked safely under his arm. Starting the engine of my car, I left the airport and headed home, while Keith drove to the Centre of Forensic Sciences (CFS), now at Keele Street and Wilson Avenue in North York, to deliver the DNA sample for testing. The CFS is staffed with highly meticulous scientists and technicians who analyze all of sorts of evidence found at crime scenes. From biological samples to documents and weapons, the CFS has the capability to glean unique information from evidence. Back at police headquarters, Keith and I spent agonizing days as the skilled scientists at CFS isolated the DNA from Opal's sample, amplified it, and compared Opal's genetic code to the sample from the Jane Doe we believed to be Melonie.

Over and over, I kept playing through the day Keith and I had told Opal her daughter might be dead. I saw the pain on her face repeatedly, felt her panic. I

thought about Melonie: *What was it like to be a child and to have no one to rely on?* As my own children sat before me at the dinner table, poking fun at one another the way siblings do, I recalled Elaine's assertion that Cleon had helped dispose of Melonie's body under the cover of night. No one loved her enough to report her missing in Canada. Only her mother in Jamaica who vainly searched for Melonie each day gave life to the memory of a largely forgotten teen.

The juxtaposition of life and death in my own life — surrounded by my loving family in one part of my day and overwhelmed by grief and murder in another — often made me feel alone. For even in the most joyous moments, such as eating dinner with my family who I loved very much, thoughts of the victims I investigated and their deaths were all-pervasive. As I stared down at my dinner those nights after returning from Jamaica, Melonie sat with me.

The following week, as I sat at the desk in my office at police headquarters, the telephone rang. I answered swiftly. On the other end was the Centre of Forensic Sciences. The results were in! The DNA of the girl found in the suitcase in 1994 sufficiently matched Opal Austin's sample. At long last the body could be identified as seventeen-year-old Melonie Biddersingh.

Mixed emotions rolled over me as I hung up the phone. I was relieved to have finally identified the previously nameless young girl, but I was also quite sad. Somewhere deep down, no matter how irrational it might have been to think so, I wished Melonie *really* had run away as Opal had insisted. I hoped she'd gone somewhere where nobody could find her and started a new, happy life so unlike her miserable childhood. Any sort of optimism I had that Melonie was still alive somewhere died with that phone call. I thought of Holly Jones, Stefanie Rengel, Katelynn Sampson, and all the other investigations I'd completed in which children were killed senselessly. Melonie Biddersingh was now added to the list of lives taken far too soon. I was now officially investigating a homicide.

By then, the case was coming together, but it was still unclear who would be charged and what they would be charged with. I scheduled a meeting with the Crown attorney to seek advice. This case was complicated, and we wanted to ensure that our legal assessment of the situation was as precise as possible. As I walked the crowded icy streets from Bay and College Streets to the office of the

Crown attorneys on University Avenue, I contemplated the suspects we had and what future steps we'd need to take.

First, there was Everton Biddersingh, identified by his wife as a man who withheld food from a girl who died grossly underweight. Elaine Biddersingh maintained he had locked Melonie in small spaces for hours on end. While Elaine didn't say Everton had physically abused the children, Melonie's injuries were consistent with multiple beatings from *someone* much larger than herself.

Then there was Elaine Biddersingh, who at first, appeared to be a woman held hostage in her own home without any means to escape an abusive situation. Melonie's injuries were so grave, however, that Elaine's insistence that she never heard her stepdaughter cry out or indicate that help was needed was preposterous. Furthermore, both Elaine and Everton had a legal duty of care to their daughter, to provide her with the necessaries of life, which were clearly not afforded Melonie, who died starving with multiple severe and untreated injuries.

Finally, there was the issue of Cleon Biddersingh. When Melonie had died, he was eighteen years old, and Elaine had identified him as allegedly assisting in the disposal of his half-sister's body.

True, we only knew some of the story, but we needed to act. Our main guiding pieces of evidence were Elaine's statement and the results of Melonie's autopsy. Elaine's role in the crime was still rather uncertain. She was, in all likelihood, an unreliable narrator of her own involvement. Elaine identified Everton as the primary executor of the abuse that led to Melonie's death, but to what extent did he have help? Surely, Elaine knew about the horrors taking place just outside her bedroom door. As for Cleon, he was living in a chaotic home environment when he allegedly committed the crimes his stepmother accused him of. *Was he legally, and for that matter morally, culpable?*

I stepped into the building that housed the offices of the Crown attorneys, showing my badge to security as I proceeded beyond the threshold, lost in thought. My leather shoes echoed on the tiled floors as I made my way down a hall toward a tall wooden door. Beyond that imposing gateway were the offices of the Crown attorneys. It wasn't a very glamorous sight, certainly a far cry from the dazzling sets of TV legal dramas: grey walls, grey desktops littered with highlighters and pens, papers stacked almost to the ceiling. Here and there,

junior Crown attorneys sat hunched behind their desktop screens and paperwork.

Manoeuvring through the crowded room, I entered the office of the head Crown attorney. She sat behind her desk reading over the files Keith and I had sent her, possibly for the hundredth time, in the careful and analytical way I'd come to associate with those in her profession.

"Hello, Steve," she said without looking up, eyes darting from one side of the page to the next. "Take a seat." After some time, the Crown attorney put the papers down and peered up from glasses perched at the end of her nose. "I'd charge them all," she said decisively.

So we did.

We coordinated the simultaneous arrests of Elaine, Everton, and Cleon Biddersingh. Simultaneous arrests are a common practice, designed to ensure no party has a chance to speak to the others and align stories before questioning can take place. These sorts of arrests require a detailed operational plan to ensure that all police jurisdictions work together to effect the apprehensions in tandem. Keith Bradshaw and I created the plan and communicated with Niagara Regional Police and the Calgary Police Service, the jurisdictions where the arrests were to take place. We knew the time and date the arrests were to occur and were aided by the co-operation of the aforementioned police services to execute them.

Elaine and Everton were sitting at the breakfast table in their home in St. Catharines when they heard a rapping on their front door. I could imagine the shock on Everton's face as he answered and saw uniformed officers standing on his stoop, and I could picture Elaine getting up from her eggs and bacon and rushing into their front hallway in time to see Everton's hands being cuffed behind his back. And then I can almost see Elaine's surprise and outrage as the officers came for her, too. She hadn't heard from us in months. Surely, she thought we'd given up on her story and she could go on with her life as if Melonie had never existed.

I expect Everton glowered at her and her at him as they were marched off to the backs of two different vehicles to be driven to Toronto and placed in custody. As they drove from St. Catharines, I wondered what they thought. Did

either of them have even a single moment of contrition? I suppose I'll never know.

Cleon Biddersingh was arrested in Alberta by the Calgary Police Service. His arrest was the saddest. His wife and children cried for the return of their beloved husband and father. They had no idea why this was happening to a man who appeared to be so steadfast and honest. The most heart-rending part was that Cleon maintained he was learning for the first time about his half-sister's death as the officers arrested him for his involvement in the disposal of Melonie's body. He, too, thought she'd run away and, he claimed, had been told the same story Opal Austin had gotten from Everton. Elaine, as her final act of cruelty toward her stepson, had implicated him falsely.

Keith Bradshaw and I were scheduled to fly to Calgary to transport Cleon back to Toronto shortly after his arrest, and I first set eyes on him through the bars of a small holding cell. He sat with his head in his hands, sobbing to himself. As I approached and stopped in front of his cell, he paused and looked up at me with tired, bloodshot eyes. I could see the watery marks where tears had landed on his white shirt. He knew who I was and that I was there to bring him back to Toronto where his half-sister had died.

"I've been looking for her all this time," he said unprompted between short, shaky breaths. "I've been looking for her all these years." He hung his head again and continued to cry.

We brought him to an interview room in the police station, but he was in too much emotional pain to speak. As we sat across from him for hours, the only sound he could muster was a whimper. Cleon insisted he'd speak with us but simply couldn't just then. He said he didn't know Melonie had died and needed time to process, to cry, to say goodbye.

Cleon was a gentle soul. I've shaken the hands of many remorseless murderers. I wasn't convinced, even then, that he was one of those cold-hearted killers. Still, better detectives than me have been fooled by crafty criminals, and intuition alone is no reason to release a man who might very well be guilty of an offence. There was nothing we could do for him just yet, only sit with him and share his misery.

Looking back, I'm surprised he wasn't angry. Accused of a crime he said he had no knowledge of, arrested, and stripped of all the rights and freedoms every

person is assured of in Canada, he should have been outraged. I certainly would have been. But he didn't shout or complain, didn't insist on his innocence. He merely wept for the half-sister he always believed was still out there somewhere.

The next day Keith and I transferred Cleon to Toronto. Readers might be surprised to discover that prisoner transfers are done via commercial flights among all other vacationers and businesspeople. Those at Calgary International that day certainly were shocked. Cleon was a tall man, over six feet, wearing a bright white jumpsuit. His ankles were shackled, wrists handcuffed. He shuffled alongside us down the long terminal hallway toward the check-in desk for our flight, clanging and clanking with every move he made. Needless to say, he was hardly inconspicuous. People gawked at him, some with curiosity, others with fear.

I glanced at him and saw that tears had once again begun to streak down his face. "Are you okay?" I asked.

"I'm embarrassed," he replied in a whisper, gazing at the chains around his feet as he moved with difficulty across the tiled floor.

I felt sympathy for him. He hadn't been proven guilty of the crimes we accused him of, yet here he was made to feel as if he were, indeed, a monster, a killer, as we marched him past disapproving onlookers. "Let's pull off for a moment," I suggested to Keith and Cleon, veering away from the stream of travellers to a place in the terminal where a long row of self-service wheelchairs sat next to luggage carts. "We can wheel you through if you like and cover the restraints with my coat." I figured people would stop staring if they couldn't see what they thought were the marks of a criminal.

Cleon nodded in acceptance.

I unfolded the wheelchair from its collapsed position, and Keith and I eased Cleon into the chair. Removing my overcoat, I draped it over his lap, covering the handcuffs and chains. Then I grasped the handles and started to push, continuing our journey through the terminal. The ruse worked: travelers stopped staring. No one knew what was beneath my coat.

When we arrived in Toronto, Cleon was taken into custody again. I watched as two officers walked him away. He would spend the night in yet another cell, and Keith and I would speak to him in the morning.

As he tottered away, I felt sorry for him once more. His wife and children, two thousand miles away, would be without their father tonight. This man appeared to be perfectly respectable and kind. Homicide sets off a ripple effect that can be experienced many degrees beyond the victim. Cleon was feeling that effect: his family, friends, and career all hung in the balance of this investigation. Even innocent parties can get dragged into the tornado-like funnel of a murder investigation.

As I got into my car in the Pearson parking garage, I began to mentally prepare for the long drive home. It was early evening, and the overcast sky was quickly losing light as I pulled onto the busy roadway outside. In the car, against the noise a staticky AM radio station, my mind wandered to Cleon: *Could he really have done as Elaine Biddersingh had said?* I couldn't imagine him keeping this secret for so many years, especially considering the way he appeared now to mourn Melonie. His tears were genuine. Surely, he believed she was still alive up until his arrest. We'd soon uncover the truth, I assured myself as snow started to fall on my windshield and catch in my headlights and the sun sank out of sight.

Just then my reverie was interrupted by the cellphone ringing abruptly from my cupholder. I answered on speakerphone.

"Hi, Steve," the Crown attorney greeted me. "I just got word from Cleon Biddersingh's counsel. He's agreed to provide us with an induced statement. We've scheduled it for tomorrow."

I thanked her as she hung up hurriedly, no doubt to attend to something else that needed her attention.

Induced statements are agreements to provide information on the condition the information can't be used against the informant at trial. Cleon could be an essential witness in our case against Elaine and Everton. The Crown attorney obviously thought as much and was willing to offer Cleon insurance: nothing he said could be used against him in court if he provided us with the entire truth. Of course, if he lied, he would be committing perjury. So the stakes were high for him. This was certainly his best hope to secure a quick way back to his family in Calgary. And he could be confident that if he told the truth he'd help attain justice for Melonie regardless of any involvement he was forced to have in the crimes his guardians had committed.

The next morning, I sat at a table at police headquarters next to Assistant Crown Attorneys Mary Humphrey and Anna Tenhouse, along with Cleon's counsel, to begin the interview. Keith Bradshaw was watching from an observation room. He would take notes, and after this meeting, he and I would get together to discuss if anything was missing or if we needed to address any issues.

Cleon was ushered into the room by two officers and took a seat across from me. He appeared exhausted; I imagined I'd be, too, spending the night in a cell without the familiar comforts of home. Cleon still seemed shaken up but was much less inconsolable than the last time we'd sat together in Calgary. Now he bravely announced he was ready to tell his story, and I could tell from the quaver in his voice that he was holding back tears already.

First, he described what it was like in the Biddersingh household prior to Melonie's death, relating dark details that gave me chills. With each word he spoke, an expression of pain crossed his face as if every memory hurt him to recall.

Much like Dwayne and Melonie, Cleon had lived in a single-parent household with his mother in Jamaica. Everton Biddersingh was his biological father, but he hadn't seen much of him throughout his young life. Then Everton returned to Jamaica from Toronto to speak with Cleon's mother and Opal Austin, Melonie and Dwayne's mother. He proposed taking his Jamaican children to live in Canada with him and his new wife, Elaine. Cleon remembered how excited he and his half-siblings were as they boarded a plane for the first time. When they arrived, however, the excitement was soon extinguished.

The Biddersinghs lived in a cramped apartment, much too small for a family of five children and two adults. But still, some parents make such living arrangements work with love and patience. These parents, however, were devoid of such virtues.

The smallness of the space they lived in easily allowed Everton and Elaine to constantly monitor them. The two so-called guardians weren't kind to the new additions to their household. They were forced to sleep on cardboard mats on the floor, were never enrolled in school, and were denied proper nutrition.

Everton and Elaine fed Cleon, Melonie, and Dwayne cornmeal and hot water, food the children considered the sort of thing dogs ate in Jamaica. They had to eat this on the floor out of bowls like animals, while Elaine and Everton's two kids got proper breakfasts and ate at the table. The couple sealed the fridge with packing tape. If the children dared to go in it to get food and Elaine found out, she'd have Everton punish them physically. Typically, he did so with one of his large booted feet, stomping on the children as they lay on the floor. Elaine, Cleon claimed, was the instigator. She hated Everton's children, calling them evil and dirty, screaming at Everton to hit them. Only after Cleon and his half-siblings were reduced to tears, bruised and bloody on the floor, would Elaine be happy. Then she retreated to her bedroom to pray.

Cleon explained that all the children who arrived from Jamaica had household "jobs" they were expected to complete daily. His was to organize the shoes, dust the surfaces of the apartment, and teach the Canadian children how to read and write. Dwayne had similar duties, including his paper route. Melonie was responsible for the care of Everton and Elaine's two kids. Neither of those two took part in any parental care. None of the children born to Everton and Elaine had chores equivalent to those of their half-brothers and half-sister. Everton's two younger kids were allowed to watch cartoons and eat cereal on Saturday mornings while Cleon, Melonie, and Dwayne scrubbed the floors and dusted the cobwebs from the corners of the apartment as their bellies rumbled with hunger.

Everton was regularly unemployed and dealt drugs to get by. He made Dwayne his delivery boy, running crack cocaine throughout Parkdale on his bicycle. Every cent collected, though, was kept by Everton. Cleon recalled that at first when they arrived in Toronto, he thought Melonie was the favoured one. She got more food than Dwayne and Cleon and was punished less, perhaps because she took care of Elaine and Everton's other kids. But that all changed the day Dwayne died.

That morning, Cleon explained, started like any other. Dwayne headed out on his paper route. Typically, he was back by early afternoon, but that day he didn't return, and Everton was furious. As day turned to night, there was no sign of Dwayne. Elaine and Everton demanded that Cleon tell them where the boy was. He told them he had no idea where Dwayne was and none of the other kids

did, either. After asking around to neighbours and friends, Everton found out that Dwayne was staying at a friend's house.

Dwayne was only thirteen years old and spent his every waking moment fearing a beating from Everton and Elaine. He wasn't allowed to watch television or go to school the way other boys his age did. The only time he could leave the apartment was to do his paper route. This sleepover, somewhere safe where he needn't fear for his life, where he was allowed to eat good food and was given warm blankets to nestle in to sleep, was an escape from the harsh, loveless reality of home. I wondered if Everton hadn't gone looking for him, if Dwayne had never returned, maybe he'd still be alive today.

When Everton and Cleon brought Dwayne back, the latter was ordered to sit in a corner of the room while their father and Elaine retired to the bedroom to figure out what to do with the boy. Dwayne sat with his head in his hands, repeating "It's over, it's over," all the while crying. Then Cleon's father and stepmother called him inside the bedroom to ask him questions and blame him for influencing Dwayne. That was when Cleon heard Melonie screech. He rushed out of the bedroom just in time to see Dwayne's shirt floating by itself in the wind off the balcony.

Neither Everton nor Elaine made the trip down more than twenty storeys to see Dwayne's broken body. They simply didn't care and remained upstairs to argue vehemently with each other. Instead, they dispatched Cleon to peek over the balcony to see what he could, which was Dwayne lying in the grass, obviously dead.

Cleon didn't think his half-brother took his own life; he was just trying to escape. The front door was deadbolted and locked with a key. The only way Dwayne could get away from his father was to climb to a neighbour's balcony. He was so afraid of what Everton would do to him that he took the risk and slipped.

After that, it got really bad for Melonie. Elaine claimed the teen was responsible for Dwayne's death, calling her the Devil's demon.

Cleon cried as he recalled the details of his sister's abuse. She was a punching bag for Everton and Elaine. Any fight they had or problem they faced, they'd hurt her for it. Melonie couldn't do anything right. She'd be locked in a closet or stuffed in a barrel and forced to sit there for hours and days on end.

Cleon longed for his mother's embrace, to be a kid again running free with sunshine on his face. Instead, he spent his days scared to death as he delivered Everton's crack throughout Parkdale, dodging police as he pedalled his bike each day, cash and drugs rattling in the belly of his backpack. Scared for what torture awaited him when he returned home at night.

Melonie lost more and more weight as she progressively starved. She began to walk with a limp and was soon so badly bruised and fractured that holding anything was too painful for her.

The week before she died, Melonie, certainly fearing for the life she could feel slipping away each moment, attempted an escape. She was barely able to walk but managed through all her pain to crawl out of the apartment, down the hall, and into the stairwell. There, she took a much-needed break to catch her breath. When Everton and Elaine noticed her missing, they sent Cleon out to search for her. He quickly found her curled up at the bottom of a flight of stairs. When she resisted his efforts to bring her back, he gazed at her hopelessly. "Melonie, where else do we have to go? There's nowhere for us."

She conceded after some time, and he carried her back up the few stairs that had felt like a mountain for her to descend, back into the place where she would, only a week later, die alone in the night.

The last time Cleon saw Melonie she was lying still on a piece of cardboard in the living room of their apartment. She was on her side in the dark, staring at the wall, at nothing. A chain was fastened around her ankle to prevent future escapes like the last one she courageously attempted. Cleon thought she was resting, so he didn't say good night and left her in peace. The next morning she was gone. Everton told him she'd run away, and Cleon never saw her again.

It only now occurred to Cleon how preposterous it was for Melonie to have escaped. With her ankle shackled and her general immobility, she likely couldn't have gotten any farther than the bottom of that first flight of stairs where he'd found her only a week before. But at the time he had hope that his half-sister, weak and emaciated as she was, had made the escape he'd been too fearful to do himself.

Cleon only stayed a year longer in that horrible apartment. One night he couldn't take it anymore and got as far away as he could, staying with an aunt for a while. Soon, he was able to get an apprenticeship as a plumber and moved

to Calgary, never to see Everton and Elaine ever again. Somewhere deep down he was still that scared teenager. But he worked to prove to himself he was worth more than how he was treated as a boy. He got married and had three children to whom he showed all the love and affection he'd never been afforded himself. Cleon managed to sculpt his life into his wildest boyhood fantasies, a life he dreamed about while going to bed hungry and bruised on the cold, hard floor of that Parkdale apartment so many years ago.

With Cleon's interview completed, the indistinct pieces of the case came into focus. Everton and Elaine together had murdered Melonie by causing her an incredible amount of harm and suffering and with utter disregard to the preservation of her life. She died, hungry and hurt, in their Parkdale apartment. They then drove her corpse to York Region in a suitcase to dispose of it and light a fire to erase their crimes in flames.

Keith and I decided to upgrade the charges for both Everton and Elaine from failure to provide the necessaries of life to first-degree murder. Cleon, the most credible witness of the tragic events that had happened in the family's apartment leading up to Melonie's death, appeared to have no involvement at all. In fact, he was a victim himself.

But why do it? Why bring the children to Toronto in the first place if their father's goal was only to make their short lives miserable? I've speculated about that for years, but I suppose I'll never know the true answer.

When I was finally able to speak to Everton Biddersingh following his arrest, he sat across from me silently, shrunken in his seat in the corner of a room. He refused to utter even a word. The large, brooding man who had so easily broken the bones of his children was now shrivelled into a ball of cowardice. He never took responsibility for what he did, never said a single word to me.

When I saw Elaine Biddersingh in an interview room for the last time after her arrest, gone was the pious woman of God who crossed herself reverently at the thought of her dear, dead stepchildren. She hissed at me with spite as she entered the room and sat pouting indignantly in silence.

Neither of them offered up a reason, as twisted as it would have been, why they felt they could take the life of an innocent girl and continue to live their lives as if she'd never existed. I often find that those so self-obsessed that they're

capable of murder are too concerned with selfish self-preservation to share why they committed their crimes. They leave people like me to ponder why.

I didn't see Everton or Elaine again until their respective trials. Everton was convicted of first-degree murder, Elaine of second degree. Currently, they spend their days in prison, hopefully reflecting on the pain they've caused. I hope they're filled with regret as they sit in their cells alone each night, thinking about what they should have done differently. They could have had a big and loving family. Whatever evil possessed them to spoil that wonderful opportunity and cause such suffering, I'll never know.

As I watched them walk away from their sentencings in handcuffs, I can't say I felt even an ounce of triumph. My mind was with Melonie and Dwayne, the children who never got a chance to grow up. And with Opal Austin who attended the trial every day far from her home to be there for her daughter even through death. And finally, with Cleon, the boy who overcame so much but somehow could never manage to escape the shadows of his childhood.

If only the children had landed in Toronto in 1991 and were brought to a happy and loving home. How different a story this would have been then.

Dwayne Biddersingh's body was exhumed during the investigation of Melonie's murder to see if evidence of foul play could be gleaned from a second autopsy. After a fall from such a great distance and over twenty years elapsing since his death, there wasn't enough evidence to determine if a homicide had been committed.

Both Dwayne's and Melonie's remains were repatriated to Jamaica to be with their mother and her family.

7

Dr. Elana Fric-Shamji: Dream Turned Nightmare

PEOPLE AREN'T ALWAYS WHO WE perceive them to be. It's a lesson that's often one of the hardest to learn in life. The human brain prefers to place people into categories that neatly sort the "good" from the "bad," the "kind" from the "cruel," the "safe" from the "hazardous." It does this, of course, to keep us safe so that we know when to trust or when to run away. If only it were really that easy, that human beings could be described with a single word. Wouldn't it be easier to figure the world out then? People aren't flat, unchanging characters like the heroes and villains we read about in books or see on our television screens. Sometimes the kind can be cruel, the bad can be good, and those who make us feel the safest can hurt us the most.

Police officers see people in their most vulnerable states, when all the facades they project to the world have been dismantled, when they're their authentic selves. I've found that some people who appear to be the most noble and worthy of praise are villainous and cruel beneath their cloaks of goodness and virtue. Those who seem rough around the edges, even scary, sometimes have the purest and kindest hearts despite all of society's harsh judgments. So how do we sort the good from the bad? How do we truly know when we're safe? Unfortunately, in my more than fifty years of life, I've never been able to find a sure-fire method to figure that out. It might be impossible to. It seems as though, with enough time, everyone will show their true colours, whether they're a hero or a villain. Hopefully, it's not too late for others when they finally do.

That brings me to one of the final cases I worked as a homicide detective before leaving the job to pursue a new career with Bell Media at CP24 — Dr. Elana Fric-Shamji's murder.

Of course, her story began long before I investigated her death. She was the daughter of Croatian immigrants and came from a family with strong family values and a stronger work ethic. Her mother and father worked hard to build a new life for themselves in Canada. They were thrilled as they watched Elana grow and discover her talents. She was gifted in both arts and sciences and excelled in school. While she could have absolutely been anything she wanted to be, Elana set her sights on one profession — becoming a doctor. She graduated with honours from the University of Windsor with an undergraduate degree and started her first year at the University of Ottawa's medical school that same year.

Elana's doctor dreams were becoming a reality. And, to be frank, she was really good at it. She excelled in school but really shined when working with patients. When it was time to pick a speciality, she decided on family medicine. Patients and colleagues loved her.

While Elana was still in medical school, a young medical resident caught her eye. He was a skinny, shy young man with dreams of becoming a neurosurgeon. His name was Mohammed Shamji. Most women didn't give Shamji a second look. He preferred books over conversation, but Elana felt instantly that she'd met the man she wanted to marry. Mohammed was everything she was looking for in a future partner. He was studious, responsible, ambitious, and hard-working, and Elana could see the two of them building a life together. Two years after their first meeting, they were married, with a baby on the way.

The two doctors seemed like the perfect couple with the perfect family. They achieved advanced degrees and professional success with each other's support, all while parenting three beautiful children. They ran long-distance races together and cheered each other on when receiving accolades and awards from their colleagues and professional associations. The couple posted perfect pictures to Instagram, Twitter, and Facebook, declaring their love for each other, boasting about the wonderful life they'd created together. To all the outsiders looking in, the Fric-Shamji duo had won life's fickle lottery.

Remember that appearances can be deceiving. Elana and Mohammed seemed to be one of Toronto's most successful and loving couples, but behind closed doors Elana suffered alone for years. She didn't have a perfect husband, nor did she have a perfect life.

It was early December 2016. Winter probed Toronto with its icy fingers, holding the landscape in a frozen grip that would last for many months. I sat at my desk, safe from the cold, with a coffee in hand, looking out from my office window at the morning commuters making their daily walks to work.

My colleagues and I chatted about our weekend strategies. Some people were planning on seeing family, others on getting in some early Christmas shopping before the crowds picked up in just a few weeks. My immediate future was less exciting. I knew exactly how I'd be spending the next forty-eight hours — sitting at home watching my pager, waiting for it to buzz.

After the Melonie Biddersingh homicide investigation, I had left my position as officer in charge of the Cold Case unit and returned to active homicide investigations. I couldn't sit in that small office any longer without being reminded of Melonie and the horrors her parents had committed against her. I needed to occupy my racing mind with fast-paced work.

Working with cold cases involves a lot of disappointments and a great many dead ends and false leads, but most of all, a lot of time with one's own thoughts. In my small office in the Cold Case unit, I sat isolated and trapped in my own thoughts most days. My mind kept returning to Melonie and her mother, Opal Austin. I found myself reliving Opal's cries from that day in Kingston, Jamaica, when we told her why we were there to ask for a DNA sample. While active homicide investigations aren't any easier to stomach than cold cases, they have sense of urgency about them. A single second can be the difference between making an arrest or having a case consigned to a box to become a cold case. This urgency made it hard to think about anything except the next minute. It was the perfect work situation for someone with a mind that likes to wander and dwell on those who have passed. So I returned to the Homicide floor and to the familiar but jolting call of my pager.

It was still morning when the telephone on my desk rang. A detective from 32 Division was on the line. She explained that she was investigating a missing person in North York, a family physician named Elana Fric-Shamji. Police attended her residence the day before at the request of her mother, Ana Fric. Ana was overwhelmed with a terrible feeling when an entire day passed without her daughter responding to her calls or texts. The last time Ana had heard from

Elana was Wednesday afternoon. It was now Friday morning and still no sign of her daughter. Elana typically responded to Ana within a matter of minutes, updating her on the happenings of a busy day and sending photos of the grandchildren to make her smile. They were a close family, and this sudden absence just wasn't like Elana. If she was going to be out of reach, she would have told her mother first.

Uniformed officers were dispatched to knock on the North York address of Elana and her husband, Mohammed, to see if she was okay. Mohammed answered the door, and when questioned about the whereabouts of his wife, told the officers frankly that she'd left him for another man. According to Mohammed, she'd walked out of their home on Wednesday night, taking a suitcase full of clothes. He didn't expect she'd be coming back, since they'd been going through the process of separation and divorce. Elana had actually served him with divorce papers just a few days earlier. Mohammed then showed the officers text messages he'd sent to Elana asking where she was as well as calls he'd made to her cellphone in the hours since she'd gone missing. His wife never replied.

Elana's Mercedes still sat in their garage. She clearly hadn't left home on her own. Perhaps her new boyfriend had picked her up, Mohammed offered, or she'd called a cab. Either way, he had no idea where his wife was. Possibly, she'd return later after she blew some steam off.

The detective who called me from 32 Division, however, didn't think Elana was going to come home. She suspected her investigation of Elana's disappearance would soon be turned over to my team in Homicide. The detective said this to me sadly, then told me the body of a human female had been found just a few hours prior to our phone call, only a day after Elana's sudden vanishing. The woman's body was hidden in a suitcase that had washed up on the bank of the Humber River in York Region.

A man on his way to retrieve his mail noticed a large, wet suitcase lodged in the detritus of the Humber River, the sort of luggage one brings on a long trip somewhere far away. It was sodden, clearly having been towed by the river's strong current before catching on reeds, sticks, and grasses and washing ashore. Many people might have shrugged off the strange suitcase and walked away, but the man had never seen a piece of luggage in the river before, and he walked that

path nearly every morning. So he pulled his cellphone out of his pocket and quickly called the nearest police station, requesting an officer attend to the suitcase immediately.

When officers arrived at the scene, they immediately fished the suitcase out of the river. It must have weighed more than a hundred pounds. The officers secured it, then proceeded to examine the strange bag, taking hold of the frozen metal zipper, tugging on it, and opening the suitcase to reveal the contents: a human female, barefoot, clothed in pyjamas, curled up inside. She wasn't breathing. Her arms and face were bruised, bloody, and swollen, the skin as cold as the river's water. The woman's blond hair had been crudely cut, as if with a knife. The long strands of hair that had been shorn were scattered around her in the suitcase. There was no indication of who the woman was. Although York Regional Police didn't have the medical evidence to confirm it yet, they figured the woman had been murdered.

The detective investigating Elana's disappearance thought it was unlikely to be a mere coincidence that she had suddenly gone missing and then a blond female washed up in the Humber River less than twenty-four hours later. All her years of investigative experience told her the two events were related. She was convinced Elana Fric-Shamji was the woman in the suitcase.

My colleagues at police headquarters watched me intently as I spoke on the phone with the detective from 32 Division. We were all working on call together as a team. If this was, in fact, a homicide it would be their case, as well. With everyone scrutinizing me, I tried to keep from wincing when I heard that the woman in York Region had been found in a suitcase. I was immediately reminded of Melonie Biddersingh and the pain she'd endured, her underweight body contorted in a suitcase her father had set ablaze and left without remorse. There's something terribly inhumane about disposing of a human body that way. All homicides are disgusting and cruel, but I found it especially heartless when a killer tossed away his victim in a bag like trash left on the side of the road. I'd hoped I wouldn't have to see another human being disrespected and discarded in a suitcase after Melonie. But in less than a year's time, here was another woman in a similar situation. Deep melancholy welled in my chest.

I told the detective at 32 Division that I'd monitor her investigation and step in if warranted. If the body was Elana's in that suitcase found in York Region, it

was likely the murder was committed in Toronto where the doctor lived and would be our jurisdiction to investigate. Until more information was available, we'd put surveillance on Dr. Fric-Shamji's husband, Mohammed.

Statistically, people are most likely to be murdered or assaulted by those closest to them, which includes family and friends. Unfortunately, that's especially true for women. Working in uniform, Sex Crimes, and Homicide, I'd witnessed too many women hurt and killed by their boyfriends, husbands, and fathers.

Past experience and an abundance of methodically analyzed statistics tell investigators that when a woman goes missing, the most likely suspect who caused her disappearance is a man she knows. We so often caution our daughters to stay away from strangers, from the time they're children on the playground to when they go out as adults with their friends at night. Rarely, however, do we tell them to beware men they know. We say "Don't talk to strangers" but never "Beware of boyfriend," despite the fact that romantic partners are more likely to hurt women and girls than any cloaked stranger hiding in a dark alley. Husbands, therefore, are always the first suspects when their wives are murdered or go missing. They must be ruled out before any other, less probable suspects, such as the villainous stranger, are entertained.

The short but valuable information Elana's husband had told the constables attending their home revealed that he and Elana were on the verge of a divorce. He'd also alleged she was having an affair. Both of these factors are common driving motives for men when murdering their domestic partners. My team would watch Mohammed carefully in the days to come.

An hour or so passed before the detective investigating Elana's disappearance phoned me again. She'd received a call from Elana's mother and wanted to relay the information, since I was now monitoring the investigation.

Ana Fric and her husband, Joe, Elana's mother and father, had been on the road for hours and had arrived at the Fric-Shamji household late the previous night. Ana and Joe wanted to care for their grandchildren in the absence of their mother. Part of me now suspects Ana wanted to be there to protect her grandchildren from any harm that might come to them, knowing in the way mothers do that her son-in-law was the reason her beloved daughter had disappeared.

Ana gave her grandchildren breakfast in the morning, made sure they washed their faces and brushed their teeth, then sent them off to school. She bounced her youngest grandson on her lap happily as his older sisters left. Then she watched carefully as Mohammed left for work at Toronto Western Hospital, wearing scrubs and his hospital ID on a lanyard around his neck. As soon as the door shut behind him, Ana's smile faded, her mouth formed a straight, harsh line, and her brow furrowed with concern.

She began to investigate the home with her husband, holding the baby in her arms, searching for clues of what might have happened to her daughter. Ana first noticed some changes in the way the home was decorated. Features of the house were different from the last time she'd visited. Two carpets she swore had been in her daughter's home for well over a year, maybe two, were missing. One black all-weather carpet near the garage was absent, and one hallway runner close to the doorway was also gone. She couldn't find traces of them anywhere — not hanging to air over the rail on the back porch, not rolled up in a hallway closet. They had simply vanished.

Something was very wrong about the missing carpets. Ana felt sick to her stomach, so she called the detective at 32 Division immediately. By the time the detective picked up, Ana had broken down into tears and dry heaving. Something very bad happened, she told the detective. She could feel it.

The carpets should have been there, but they were gone. She then recalled when she'd first arrived at the house she'd vacuumed mud from the front door, and there was also mud present on the floor in the garage. At the time, she'd thought nothing of it, but now she wondered where the mud had come from. To make matters worse, she said, she remembered she'd seen Mohammed walking with a basket of clean clothes from the laundry room that morning. He never did laundry, never did anything. She hadn't seen the man lift a single finger in the ten years her daughter had been married to him. Ana began to hyperventilate.

She knew her daughter had served divorce papers to Mohammed earlier in the week. Ana remembered asking Elana if she wanted her to come and stay with her before the papers were served. She knew Mohammed to be hot-headed and often physical with her daughter, so she wanted to be there to mitigate any

altercations that might occur once Mohammed received notice of his wife's intention to divorce him.

"Don't worry, Mom," Elana had told her mother over the phone. "He won't do anything stupid. There's no need for you to drive all the way up here."

Ana had obeyed her daughter's wishes and stayed in Windsor with her husband. But now, with Elana missing along with the carpets, and the sight of Mohammed cleaning something up, she regretted she hadn't made the trip then. She feared her daughter had been murdered by a husband who refused to let her leave him.

After the detective from 32 Division finished recounting Ana's story to me, I now believed the $1.5-million North York mansion that Mohammed and Elana owned together might be a crime scene. *Had Mohammed Shamji thrown out the carpets because they were covered in blood? Did the mud come from the river where the suitcase was found in North York? Was he cleaning towels he'd used to mop up a crime scene?* I told the 32 Division detective to seal and hold the property so that no further evidence could be destroyed while we awaited more information.

Once a crime scene has been contaminated, there's no getting back the evidence that's been compromised. As soon as there's suspicion a homicide might have occurred somewhere, the entire location must be locked down. Mohammed was notified that his home was under investigation. Soon, constables arrived and sealed the home, and yellow police tape marked the front yard.

No one was getting into that house. No evidence was getting out.

The rest of the morning was spent answering calls to monitor the investigation. I soon received word from York Region that the suitcase the unidentified body was found in was labelled with a luggage tag. The surname read "Frio." I wondered if "Frio" had actually been "Fric" and the *c* had been smudged or misprinted to appear as an *o*.

However, I didn't have to speculate long. Crime scene photos had been circulated to investigators in Toronto from York Regional Police. Ana and her husband, Joe, were asked to look at the photo of the woman found in the Humber River and to identify if she was Elana. At first they didn't recognize her. The face was too bruised and swollen, so unlike their beautiful daughter's with her sparkling blue eyes and bright, expressive smile. But the longer they

studied the photo, the more they could make out Elana's familiar features. They recognized their little girl behind the injuries that at first obstructed her identity. Joe Fric nodded as tears poured down his face. The woman in the photos was, indeed, their daughter, Dr. Elana Fric-Shamji.

A small part of me, no matter how pessimistic I'd become over the years, had clung to the possibility that Elana really had left the house by her own choice. I'd hoped she'd return home, confused at the crime scene tape roping off her front door, that she'd share with her children some improbable story about why it had taken her so long to return to her family.

The pathologist who conducted Elana's autopsy noted she'd been badly beaten prior to her death. Her nose had bled, her eyes were swollen, her arms and legs revealed large purple bruises, and her ribs were fractured from multiple blows to the abdomen. But none of these injuries were necessarily immediately fatal. What had caused Elana's death was a neck injury; her neck and larynx were fractured. She died from strangulation. The bruising on her neck was consistent with a rope, or a pair of large hands, applying pressure to the area for an extended period of time. There was no doubt now: Elana Fric-Shamji had been murdered. So my team and I took over the investigation. At this stage in my homicide career, that team consisted of myself and three other detectives — Andy Singh, Les Dunkley, and Rob Choe, all clever and careful investigators.

Shortly after the identification of Elana's body, I received notice that two officers in 32 Division had interviewed Yasmin, Elana and Mohammed's eldest daughter. She was only twelve years old, but she'd already accomplished so much in her young life. Her father wanted her to be excellent like her grandfather, his father, a sort of excellence he'd aspired to his entire life. She was an avid reader, a learned piano player, studied introductory level Mandarin, and ran cross-country races. She was also a jiu-jitsu student, a pastime her entire family had picked up together. Yasmin and her siblings would watch her parents spar at their jiu-jitsu studio on weeknights, cheering them on from the edges of the mats.

Although Yasmin sat before the officers who interviewed her with the poise and eloquence of an adult, she was still only a child. No matter how much she'd been trained to understand arts, athletics, math, and culture, there were things she couldn't grasp yet. Yasmin didn't understand why her mom had left or

where she'd gone. All she knew was that she missed her more than she'd ever missed anything or anyone before in her young life. In these past few days of uncertainty, Yasmin wished she had her mother there — a warm, soft, familiar embrace to draw her close and into safety.

The morning of her mother's disappearance, Yasmin emailed her, concerned when she awoke and Elana wasn't home: "Hi, Mom, where are you?" There was no reply. Elana was a family physician at Scarborough Hospital and a delegate for the Ontario Medical Association. She was a professional with a fast-paced career and a busy social life. Elana always replied to emails, especially those her young daughter sent her throughout the day.

Yasmin thought back to the night before she'd woken up to find her mother had disappeared. She was practising piano before bed — her father ensured she practised an hour each night, even on weekends. Over the sounds of the rising and falling scales she played, she heard her parents arguing. It wasn't uncommon for them to do that, though; she was used to it. They'd been having catastrophic fights since as early as she could remember. Each day she woke up hoping today would be a day of peace, but it rarely ever was. She just wished everyone could be happy. Their arguing continued for some time that night, long after her mother had bathed her little brother and tucked him into his crib.

Her parents were in their room now, screaming at each other. Yasmin lay in the dark under her blankets, listening to the sounds of the muffled argument passing through the shared wall between her and her parents' bedrooms. She closed her eyes tight, hoping she'd fall asleep faster and that sleep would cloak the noise of her parents' fight. It made her sick when they battled like that. She felt as though she couldn't control a single thing in her life, not even her own happiness. Yasmin curled her hands into little fists, sensing the tension rise in her body, listening as the arguing continued on and on.

Suddenly, a loud scream startled her, clearly coming from her mother. It sounded as if she was in pain. Then a loud bang, like something hitting the floor very hard. The arguing abruptly stopped. *Quiet*. Yasmin sat in the suffocating silence, eyes wide open, searching through the darkness in her room. Some time passed and still she heard nothing. She decided to go and check on her parents. Slipping out of bed, she walked slowly, softly, across the floor, turned the doorknob, and stepped into the hall. Her heart thumped in her chest, pounding

against her rib cage as she took the six or seven short steps to the door of her parents' room. Peeking in the doorway, she saw her father's head and hands crouched on the far side of the bed; full view of him was obstructed by the bed itself. She didn't see her mother.

"Go back to bed!" Mohammed ordered her, catching sight of her slight silhouette looking through the doorway.

Yasmin nodded hastily and scurried away, shutting her bedroom door tight behind her. Her father was strict, and she should have been sleeping, not listening to their argument.

But something didn't feel right to twelve-year-old Yasmin. She heard her father rustling through the walk-in closet shortly after she tucked herself back into bed. The noise was familiar to her, a sound she often heard when her parents retrieved their luggage from the recesses of their closet before packing for work trips or family vacations.

The next morning, Elana didn't come in to wake up Yasmin as she usually did. Yasmin heard her father downstairs in the kitchen making breakfast. Her father arranged the children's schedules, planned their activities, monitored them as they studied, and scrutinized their report cards, but he never cooked for them. In fact, he didn't do *any* care tasks for her or her siblings. Her mother always did. The strange feeling she'd had the night before grew as she listened to her father rummaging through drawers downstairs to find pots and pans for the first time in her twelve years of life.

Yasmin continued to ready herself for the school day. She folded her pyjamas, put on her school uniform, and packed her textbooks into her backpack, all with that odd feeling in the pit of her stomach. As she headed downstairs, she passed her parents' bedroom. In a split-second decision, she slipped into the room quietly in her socked feet. She wanted to see if she could learn anything from the state of the room about what had happened the night before. A quick investigation, nothing too lengthy. She didn't want her father to find her snooping around his room. In her brief visual sweep, she saw that the bedroom looked as it always did. Nothing appeared to be out of place. The bed was even made nicely. *Maybe she'd just been anxious, maybe nothing bad had happened at all*. Her mother always told her she was too anxious. Surely, that's

what was rearing its ugly head. She shook off her case of nerves and headed downstairs for breakfast.

Her siblings were already asking where their mother was by the time Yasmin joined them in the kitchen.

"She's left for work," her father said in a way that invited no further questions.

Yasmin looked at the time — it was far too early for her mother to be at work. Still, she tried to shake off the feeling that she'd heard something bad happening to her mother the night before.

Her father drove them to school that day, something else out of the ordinary.

Unexpectedly, Yasmin's grandparents showed up shortly after that. They told her and her siblings that their mother was *missing*, a word that struck fear into Yasmin's heart, a word her father had dared not utter. He had said she was at work, on a walk, out with friends, many different things over the past twenty-four hours, but never *missing*. Her grandparents seemed worried. It frustrated them when her father didn't seem to take her mother's absence seriously. She was *somewhere*, he would say.

Her grandmother yelled at her father in a tone Yasmin had never heard before. "How the hell do you not know where she went?"

When Yasmin's interview was conducted, Elana's children still hadn't been told about their mother's death. Ana Fric informed them later after their interviews when they could all be together as a family. But Yasmin, somewhere deep down, already knew her mother was gone. She hoped it wasn't true, that the nagging feeling that had plagued her since the night of her mother and father's big fight was some misguided fear. Even still, she had repeated everything strange that had happened that night to herself a thousand times so she wouldn't forget … just in case she needed to share her story.

I was amazed at Yasmin's bravery. She'd grown up in a household where every member's actions and activities were harshly scrutinized by her father. Even though she feared him, her love for her mother triumphed over her fear. She spoke honestly, specifically, and directly in the way even many adults can't when placed in a situation rife with loss and uncertainty.

Yasmin's interview, along with the news of Elana serving Mohammed divorce papers, the alleged affair, Mohammed's angry reputation, the missing carpets, and the mud found by Ana Fric in Elana and Mohammed's house, was sufficient to convince me that Shamji had killed his wife.

After consulting with Andy, Les, and Rob, we all agreed that Mohammed Shamji had murdered his wife. However, I was still reluctant to make an arrest. Our evidence was good and sufficient to ground an arrest for first-degree murder, but as with any investigation, the evidence could always be better. I was a bit of a perfectionist and wanted to hold off a little bit longer. But then I received a call. The officers conducting the surveillance of Mohammed had followed him into the parking lot of a Timothy's coffee shop on Highway 10. They watched as he parked his blue Ford pickup in front of the café, got out, and strode through the doorway, glancing nervously over his shoulder as he did so.

They watched him through the shop's large glass windows as he stood in the entrance, glancing around, eyes scanning each table. *He was looking for someone* . Mohammed soon spotted the person he was searching for and began to make his way toward him. A man sat in the corner drinking a coffee. He was older than Mohammed and had gelled grey hair that was receding. The man wore a crisp grey suit and had a leather bag sitting on the floor beside him. He waved at Mohammed, who came over and sat across from him. Then the two began to speak. The detectives watching the meeting obviously couldn't hear what the men were saying, but they understood from their hunched bodies and the way Mohammed's eyes darted from side to side as if to scan for eavesdroppers, that they were discussing something secret. The detectives' internal alarms started ringing as they observed the scene play out before them.

The detectives conducting the surveillance called me and explained what they were seeing through the window of the Timothy's. Did I think Mohammed was arranging passage to somewhere no one would ever find him again? At the time, I wasn't sure what to think. But I'd seen enough murderers try to slip away with the helping hand of a well-connected, well-paid assistant. If Mohammed was able to evade surveillance for a moment, if he got into a different car, boarded a flight or a train, he could be lost forever. Even if this

wasn't his attempt at an escape or planning one, it reminded me that in the blink of an eye he could disappear. It was too risky to leave him any longer without arresting him, and our evidence was more than strong enough to ground an arrest. I told the detectives to arrest him for first-degree murder.

They exited their vehicle, rushed into the coffee shop, and arrested Mohammed. He went with them willingly, walking with hands handcuffed behind his back to the exit of the coffee shop. The baristas in the café stared with gaping mouths as he was escorted from the establishment, passing his blue pickup on the way out.

So who was the mysterious man with the slicked-back grey hair and crisp grey suit? The man who sat whispering across from Mohammed sipping a cup of coffee was Liam O'Connor, a defence lawyer Mohammed had retained to represent him. He was seeking legal advice.

I called Ana Fric to notify her that Mohammed had been arrested for first-degree murder. She and her husband were staying with relatives just outside Toronto. Their grandchildren were with them so they could mourn together. I could hear the children crying in the background, a common sound, I was sure, in the past twenty-four hours.

In the span of five days, Elana's children had lost both a mother and a father; I couldn't imagine their confusion and pain. The grief they felt for their mother's death was nearly eclipsed by the hatred they must have had for their father. When Mohammed killed his wife, he made an irrevocable choice that hurt so many people, even beyond Elana, including the children he claimed to love and care for. To this day, Mohammed's children haven't forgiven him for the pain and loss he caused. How could they? A father is supposed to love his family, not rip it apart with cold, calculating hands.

Ana and Joe Fric were thankful that their son-in-law had been arrested, but the arrest didn't satisfy them in the way they'd initially hoped. Nothing could do that. So Ana and Joe sat up at night unable to console each other. Their minds wandered to happier times, thinking of Elana as the baby they'd brought home, swaddled in pink, to their first house in Canada, as the smart little girl who announced proudly she wanted to be a doctor, as the first child in either of their families to be accepted to university. The happy memories only magnified their

sadness. For when they blinked themselves out of their happiest daydreams and returned to their new reality, they realized they'd never be that happy again — not without Elana.

Mohammed had been arrested and charged with first-degree murder, but our work was still only just beginning. Andy, Les, Rob, and I needed to continue compiling evidence for the Crown to use in its case. The investigation was nowhere near its conclusion. We still hadn't analyzed the crime scene — the North York home of Elana and Mohammed. After Mohammed's arrest, I made preparations to drive to North York and inspect the house. Forensic Identification Services (FIS) had already been busy analyzing the residence, taking samples and bagging evidence to be assayed in its laboratory. The home was over three thousand square feet, even more room if the sprawling backyard was counted, so the analysis was taking a significant amount of time to complete. FIS combed through the building methodically, ensuring no piece of potential evidence was left out of the investigation.

I remember the drive north that day. The December sky hung low and grey with great, threatening clouds. I arrived in North York in the late afternoon, the sun already sinking in the gloomy sky. It would be dark by five, I thought to myself, peering pessimistically out my windshield. December was such a dark and dreary month. I drove along Mohammed and Elena's street, a route they travelled many times returning home from their shifts at their respective hospitals. The neighbourhood was a mismatched patchwork consisting of newbuilds constructed in the footprints of torn-down bungalows and mid-century single-storey homes that had stood for more than fifty years. It was a classic mosaic neighbourhood of new and old so common in Toronto as young, wealthy professionals moved into well-established middle-class communities.

Many of the neighbours were already preparing for the Christmas season, even though it was still only early December. Homes sat in the dull winter daylight, twinkling lights pinned to their eavestroughs and glowing statues of Santa Claus waving at the street. As I arrived at my destination, I wondered when the neighbourhood had last seen such a tragedy, watching as neighbours

walking their dogs along the street of decorated lawns passed the home-turned–crime scene, craning their necks to catch a glimpse of it.

The Fric-Shamji household resembled many of its neighbouring properties. It stood two storeys high, with crisp new brick cladding the exterior and a newly paved driveway leading to the garage. A skinny, bare elm sapling grew in the front yard, probably planted when the house was first built not all that long ago. Police tape stretched from corner to corner of the huge lot. I passed through the tape and walked past the officers who stood outside guarding the home, climbing up the stairs to the front stoop. I met the members of FIS at the doorway, who escorted me through the home, showing me the significant pieces of evidence they'd found in the house they'd been analyzing for days.

The Fric-Shamji house had crisp white walls, big windows that allowed lots of light to stream in on a sunny day, and counters and floors that were sparkling clean. It looked like a home whose owners had carefully prepared it for a dinner party they were hosting, as if the guests would soon arrive with bottles of wine in hand, shrugging off their coats and hanging them over the bench in the front room off the entryway next to the baby grand piano.

The house was the architectural expression of the life Mohammed Shamji wanted everyone to believe he lived. Polished, tidied, and sanitized, carefully constructed so as to not reveal the truth of who he was. I walked past Mohammed's home office where he proudly displayed dozens of medals earned in cross-country races, marathons, and jiu-jitsu competitions. They hung on the wall so that anyone passing by could see his accomplishments, *so they could see proof of how great he was*.

FIS escorted me upstairs to the bedroom of Mohammed and Elana, the place from where Yasmin had heard her mother scream. The crime scene analysts had already found Elana's blood on the floor surrounding the bed. It had nearly blended in with the hardwood flooring and wasn't easy to catch.

From the cuts and bruises on Elana's face and body, it was clear Mohammed, a man who had won medals in jiu-jitsu, had punched and kicked his wife multiple times before strangling her to death. She had bled on the floor in the process of the assault. Further evidence located in the bedroom included cut pieces of blond hair. Elana's hair was chopped haphazardly on the night of her murder, and many strands of it were discovered in the suitcase with her

body. The rest of her hair was located in the bedroom and other places throughout the house. Mohammed had shorn his wife's hair as one final act of disrespect, then put her in the suitcase, scattering the cut hair in the process.

It appeared as though the entire family's collection of suitcases was stored in the back of Mohammed and Elana's walk-in closet, with the exception of one, of course, the suitcase in which Elana's body was found. That piece of luggage was far away, undergoing forensic analysis in another part of Toronto.

It was true that Yasmin's room shared a wall with her parents' bedroom. Loud noises in one room, such as a scream, could have easily passed through to the other. I saw the children's rooms, with their toys, books, and desks with pencils and pens. They could never come back here, I thought. Those kids would never find comfort again in this house. All their treasures in their bedrooms would forever be tainted.

I left the top floor of the house, and FIS brought me downstairs to show me smears of blood they'd discovered in other areas of the home. Elana's blood was found on the garage floor and inside her Mercedes, along with mud, twigs, and dirt.

Mohammed's journey through his home from bloodstain to bloodstain could be easily visualized. Moving from the bedroom, where he folded Elana's bruised, lifeless body into a suitcase, he carried it down the large, winding staircase of their home. Then he loaded the suitcase with his wife inside the trunk of her Mercedes and pulled out of their garage in the early hours of the morning while their children slept unattended upstairs.

I could picture him driving aimlessly through the night, searching for a place to hide the evidence of what he'd done, hoping he wasn't pulled over by police. As daylight drew nearer, he settled on a bridge that overpassed the Humber River. He got out of his car and wheeled the heavy suitcase behind him through mud and brush until he was close enough to the river's icy waters to throw it in. With some effort, he heaved the piece of luggage over the brush and into the Humber. He didn't stick around to see if it was washed away by the river's current. With muddy boots and bloody clothes, he made the drive back to his home. His children hadn't yet awoken by the time he returned.

When he was back in his house, he kicked off his boots, threw his pants and shirt into the washing machine, and began to retrace his steps through the

house, mopping up any evidence of Elana's blood with a towel. He even rolled up the carpets he'd dirtied while disposing of his wife's body and transported them to his truck to be discarded later. After a shower and a final sweep of the home, he felt as though he'd successfully concealed the evidence, so he started the unfamiliar task of making breakfast for his three children.

Mohammed had tried his best to erase the evidence of what he'd done, but the house was big. The kids were beginning to stir — now his sole responsibility to take care of — and he had to be in the hospital for surgery that morning. So Mohammed had to rush the cleanup. In his hurried and sleep-deprived state, he did a sloppy job. Sure, it was good enough to hide evidence from his kids, but it wasn't good enough to hide the true story from FIS of what had happened to Elana. With an application of luminol, FIS was able to, quite literally, illuminate all the places Elana had bled in the house. Mohammed also hadn't thought to clean the dirt from Elana's Mercedes, which could be compared to the sediment found on the suitcase. Nor had he thought to remove the luggage tag clearly displaying Elana's surname before throwing the suitcase into the frigid Humber.

After he dropped his children off at school, Mohammed made some phone calls and sent some texts, feigning concern for his "missing" wife. He sent her multiple messages that day, asking where she was. In a final move to convince any future investigators he wasn't culpable of his wife's murder, Mohammed phoned Elana's divorce lawyer and told her he was willing to proceed with the divorce amicably. They could split all their assets fifty-fifty.

Shamji believed he was an expert at crafting a lie, since he'd been doing it for years, convincing the world that he and Elana were a happy couple. He probably thought he'd get away with his crime, that a few text messages would paint him as a concerned and loving husband. But try as he might have, he failed miserably.

I left the house just as the sun was setting, sliding into the cold driver's seat of my car parked at the curb near the Fric-Shamji house. For a while, I sat there to take a moment to look back on the beautiful home that had housed so much sadness and chaos inside. How lovely life could have been for Elana and her children if her death had never occurred, if her husband had allowed an

amicable divorce, and if she and her kids had been able to live happily together without being controlled by Mohammed, which had gone on far too long.

Shaking my head sadly, I started the engine of my car and pulled away from the crime scene, passing by the neighbouring homes glittering in anticipation of the holiday season. As I pulled onto the highway behind a sea of illuminated tail lights, my mind turned to the one thing I didn't understand: *Why did Mohammed kill his wife?* Of course, it was likely he was angry about the divorce papers served to him on the Monday preceding Elana's murder. Sure, it was easy enough to say he was mad and acted irrationally, but Mohammed was a man who had taken the Hippocratic oath, had sworn to help others, to do no harm. How was it that a doctor who had enough good judgment and reason to operate on human brains and spinal cords each day, quite literally taking his patients' lives into his hands, could suddenly snap?

The media devoured Elana's case and sensationalized Mohammed, the talented surgeon who had committed murder. His patients called in to talk radio shows to testify to his brilliance. He was a lifesaver, a miracle worker even, they said. Some people even protested the cancellation of his medical licence, saying that the good he was capable of creating far outweighed the wrongs he'd committed. They insisted he should still be able to practise medicine. *He was a good doctor*.

People ruminated on the Fric-Shamji case, baffled by the details. No one could understand why such a brilliant man would do such a terrible thing. He had so much promise, he could do so much *good*, why would he throw it all away? Elana became an afterthought. Her whole life — her master's degree, professional accomplishments, medical practice, medals won, even her role as a mother of three — was reduced in headlines to a single title: "doctor's wife." Mohammed committing murder was framed as "throwing his life and patients away," trivializing Elana's strangulation and the indignity done to her body as a *mistake* committed by an otherwise virtuous man. Respectfully, they had it all wrong.

Sure, Mohammed was good at his job. I would hope that he would be, having spent years studying and training to operate on the human body. But his qualifications and professional success didn't absolve him of the atrocities he committed against his wife and family. He wasn't a brilliant doctor who just so

happened to kill his wife. If he were really as brilliant as everyone proclaimed him to be, my team and I certainly wouldn't have caught him. I doubt we would have stood much of a chance investigating an evil genius.

Mohammed wasn't who people thought he was at all. The good doctor persona, the accomplished athlete, the loving husband and father, these were all disguises that hid the truth. He was a serial abuser and a murderer who ended the life of a talented doctor and ruined the happiness of his family. He just so happened to also be able to do brain surgery. Mohammed didn't suddenly snap. It wasn't a heat-of-the-moment decision he'd made when he broke his wife's bones and gripped her neck until her blood could no longer reach her brain. He had been hurting his wife for years. This was the inevitable conclusion of more than a decade of abuse.

The more my team and I dug through Mohammed and Elana's past, the more we learned how truly sad their relationship had been. It was true that Elana had met Mohammed while she was in medical school and was instantly smitten. But the fairy tale, doctor-meets-doctor love story they had repeated to friends and family over and over again throughout the years ended there. Every moment they spent together after their first introduction was filled with heartache and torment.

To start with, Mohammed didn't return Elana's affections. He was cold throughout their early relationship and was frequently absent from even the most important moments of her young life. While Elana was committed to the young, ambitious doctor, he continued to see an ex-girlfriend, despite his relationship with Elana. Even with all his aloofness and social awkwardness, Elana admired and loved him. She thought he was the smartest man she'd ever met and pictured a beautiful future for the two of them. Mohammed, though, didn't return her adoration. Be that as it may, they were soon thrust into a very serious relationship: Elana was pregnant. They grappled with what to do with the unplanned pregnancy. Ultimately, they decided they wanted to be a traditional family. Rather than co-parenting separately, they chose to get married. They quickly planned a wedding and were married to each other a few months before the arrival of their first child, a daughter. Unfortunately, their

wedding wasn't the beginning of a long, happy relationship, as Elana hoped it would be.

She was a new mother and a new doctor and balanced each of these adjustments with as much poise and grace as one possibly could, given the overwhelming nature of each of her new roles. But she did it entirely alone. Mohammed didn't help with the care of their infant, nor did he cook, clean, or deal in any capacity with life outside of medicine and medical studies. Elana managed the logistics of both their lives alone, while Mohammed harshly criticized how she cooked, how she cleaned, and how she behaved. They fought constantly and bitterly. In their first seven months of marriage, the police were called to their address numerous times, making Elana fear more and more for her safety.

Only a few months after the birth of their first daughter, Elana phoned a close friend in tears. She confided to her friend that she and Mohammed had been fighting and that he'd threatened their daughter during the fight, the baby who sat sleeping in her arms. He said he'd hurt the infant and blame Elana for it. She didn't know what to do. The friend Elana called was shocked by this disturbing news and called the Children's Aid Society (CAS) immediately.

Shortly after the call was made to the CAS, police officers were sent by the society to do a wellness check on Yasmin, the infant daughter of the doctors. When the officers showed up on the stoop of the couple's Ottawa home, they noticed Elana's lip was cut and her face was bruised yellow and brown, as were her arms. She explained to the officers that Mohammed had pinned her to the ground during a fight they had and then had hit her. He'd also threatened to hurt her and Yasmin if she ever tried to leave.

Mohammed had a long history of hurting Elana. He was frequently physical with her during fights, but he was also emotionally abusive. Often, he kept Elana from attending to Yasmin when the infant cried for her mother, barricading the doorway with his body and refusing to let her go to her screaming baby. Sometimes their fights extended outside their home and into the street.

Elana explained her history with her husband to the police officers while noting she'd been hesitant to get help. She knew the ramifications these allegations could have on her husband's career and didn't want him to suffer

such life-altering consequences. It might seem irrational why Elana would want to protect a man who hurt her and her baby daughter. It might be that she loved him and wanted to show him kindness in a way he'd never shown her. Probably, though, Elana was afraid of the consequences reporting her abuser would have in the end for her and her child. Mohammed had everything — a beautiful wife and baby and a thriving career — and he still behaved like a monster. I'm sure Elana couldn't imagine the lengths her husband would go to hurt her if everything in his life was taken away from him.

Seeing the bruises on Elana's arms and face and hearing the threats Mohammed made against his wife and daughter, the officers attending the doctors' house charged Mohammed with assault. Elana was escorted out of the home that night with her infant and went to stay at a friend's. Mohammed was livid that his career might be over no sooner than it had started — no medical association would admit a convicted criminal. At the time, he was preparing to leave for the United States and had an opportunity to work on a doctorate at Duke University. He was sure his visa would be denied with an assault on his record.

Shortly after the charges were laid, they were dropped by the Crown. I'm not entirely sure why that was, but I can speculate. Back in 2005 if a victim didn't want to testify against her assailant in a domestic assault case, the Crown would drop the charges in favour of a peace bond. The victim is often the Crown's only witness and a case is difficult to prosecute without her. This has since changed and now even if the victim is unwilling to participate in the trial, the Crown will proceed with prosecution. It's likely that in 2005 Elana was too frightened to take the stand and testify against her husband, so the assault charges against Mohammed were dropped. He and Elana got back together sometime afterward, and he left to work on his doctorate in the United States, his young family in tow.

The years passed, their family grew, and the two doctors moved to Toronto, each achieving success in their respective fields, but Mohammed never grew kinder or gentler with Elana.

She had a number of strange accidents over the years that she explained away to friends and family with inconsistent stories. One such accident sticks out in my memory — Elana cut her palm open. The wound was so deep that she

needed emergency surgery to repair the damage done to her ligaments and tendons. I interviewed one of Elana's close friends, a physician who had known her for a number of years and had watched Elana struggle with Mohammed. The friend told me she didn't believe that Elana's injury was an accident. Elana had been considering a career pivot out of family medicine and into surgery around the time of the "accident." The friend believed Mohammed had cut her dominant hand, hoping he'd do enough damage to her mobility that she could never enter the surgical field. What was strange, the friend said, was that Elana could never seem to recall the story of how she got hurt. Every time she was asked, she gave a different explanation of the injury's origin. Only Elana's closest friends got this unfiltered preview into her life; they knew the truth about the Fric-Shamji marriage, the reality so few were able to see for themselves.

From the outside, Elana and Mohammed were the perfect couple. Just a week before he killed her, Mohammed tweeted a congratulatory message to his wife for all their followers to see. The pair were active on social media, posting images of each other and exchanging loving comments and captions. But in reality, Mohammed curated the image of a perfect life for outsiders to see. He strictly controlled Elana's social media accounts. The smiling images posted of the husband and wife together were carefully constructed for everyone to see that the husband and wife were *happy*, they were *successful*, they were *fine*. Offline and behind closed doors, Elana suffered.

Finally, after years of assaults and abuse, Elena mustered enough courage to bring up the topic of separation to Mohammed. In the May prior to her death, she first consulted a lawyer. She told her lawyer she'd been physically and emotionally abused for years and was convinced Mohammed was, once again, having an affair with a colleague. Despite Elana's desire to leave, Mohammed refused to accept that she wanted out of their marriage. He insisted he would change. After some convincing, Elana agreed to give the marriage yet another chance. She told her lawyer she wouldn't be going ahead with the divorce. But that didn't last very long. The fighting and abuse continued to intensify. In the fall of 2016, Elana had had enough. She told Mohammed flatly that she wanted a divorce. Yet again he refused to accept her wishes. When she told him they were divorcing, he'd say, "No, we aren't." Elana moved out of their shared

bedroom and into the basement of their home until their divorce was finalized, but Mohammed continued not to accept the situation.

Elana and her lawyer made Elana's intentions to leave Mohammed official on the Monday of the week Elana died. Her lawyer sent a formal email to Mohammed notifying him of Elana's intention to divorce him. Almost two full days passed before Mohammed murdered his wife.

What exactly happened on the night Mohammed killed Elana, none of us will ever know for sure. The last things that were said and done will always be a mystery. All we can be certain of is that there was a fight between the two, likely pertaining to their imminent divorce. Mohammed wanted Elana to be dead rather than be his ex-wife, so he decided to end her life.

Mohammed Shamji pleaded guilty to second-degree murder, taking a deal extended to him by the Crown's office. He wouldn't be eligible for parole for seventeen years, a better deal when compared to the twenty-five years he would have spent in prison until parole eligibility if he'd been found guilty of the original first-degree murder charge. It's important to note that eligibility for parole doesn't guarantee parole. In over a decade, Mohammed will have a chance to make a case to the parole board justifying why he deserves to be granted parole. His children and parents-in-law will have the opportunity to speak to the board, as well, and recommend he not be released if they so choose.

Ultimately, Assistant Crown Attorney Henry Poon extended this second-degree plea deal to Mohammed to spare Yasmin. She was to be the Crown's star witness, which meant that at only twelve years old she would have to relive the trauma of the night she heard her father kill her mother during her examination in court. Then the defence counsel, Liam O'Connor, would have the opportunity to cross-examine the child, harshly drawing into question her reliability as a witness, asking probing questions to impugn her credibility. It would be so unfair to a girl whose mother was murdered by her own father to make her go through such a heartbreaking exercise after all she'd already been through.

Mohammed signed the plea deal. While it was undoubtedly good of him to spare his daughter the pain of testifying in court, I'm hesitant to say that Mohammed's signing the deal meant he truly was remorseful. For, if he were,

there would be no deal necessary. He would have pleaded guilty without any incentive of a reduced period before parole eligibility. Shamji spared his daughter her suffering, but only because there was a benefit accruable to him.

It's been five years since Elana's children lost their mother and father in a sudden and tragic turn of events that swept through their lives like a landslide. The children would never see their mother again, never feel the comfort of her warm embrace or the soothing sound of her voice. When they buried her, they buried their innocence and their childhoods, too. As the years go on, they'll start to forget little details about her. The youngest of the children might lose all memories of Elana except those immortalized in pictures and home movies. How unfair it is that at such a young age some children must experience such loss and grapple with concepts like life and death that seem too vast and overwhelming even to those far beyond their age. Even more unjust is when such loss is preventable. Elana's children could have grown up happily without ever experiencing such emotional damage. They could have had their mother with them throughout all the major moments of their lives. But now they faced the rest of their lives without her alone.

Well, not alone; they had their grandparents. They were fortunate to have grandparents who loved them very much. The Frics took in Elana's kids after their daughter's death and became parents all over again. Suddenly, in their sixties, they had a toddler and two older children well on their way into adolescence. It was a responsibility they were proud to take on. They raised the children with the same love and care they'd raised Elana, keeping her memory alive for her children. The Frics encouraged their grandkids to be *kids* in a way they'd never been before. Elana's children had been so overscheduled by their father. They were always running from one activity to the next, practising something, studying for something; they never had time to play or be still. With their grandparents, they were learning what it meant to have a childhood without constant pressure to achieve excellence. They were sad, they felt loss, but in their grandparents' care they had a place to grow emotionally, a place where they could make mistakes and try new things. In many respects, they were thriving out of the care of their father.

They would never look at their father in the same way again. They could never hold his hand or feel his embrace without being reminded that the hands and arms that tried to comfort them are the same that ended their mother's life. The last time I spoke to the family, the children had no plans ever to speak to Mohammed again. As young as they might have been when their mother was taken from them, they knew the sting of betrayal and would never forget who it was who caused them such pain — their own father. Parents are supposed to love and nurture their children, not be the source of their torment.

As time marches on, Elana's children are healing. I hope one day they find peace, which can be so hard to come by when someone is taken out of your life suddenly and violently. But I hope they find it.

8

Leaving Homicide Behind

I USED TO LIVE IN a creaky house in the middle of nowhere north of Toronto, though the area has since been built up as the years have passed. When I arrived home there each evening, I felt totally isolated. It was a house at the end of a street hidden in the trees and hills far away from all other people and things. During the day, the birds would sing, the sky was blue, and it felt like a haven. I could sit outside and let the songs of the outdoors wash over me. What a joy it was. But when the sun went down, things changed.

At night the shadows of the trees reached out from the edges of the property, their branches like long, skeletal fingers as darkness cloaked the place in a black velvet blanket so heavy it could suffocate a person. And then there would be silence. As the neighbours headed indoors and the roads cleared of cars, it could get so quiet in that old house that my own thoughts sounded like screams. The thing about living in a place like that is at night you're all *alone*. As a boy in Toronto, I lived among busy streets where even in the earliest morning hours one could look outside and see people still going about their daily lives, evidence that someone other than myself existed. Sometimes you need that: a sign that you're not the only person in the world. But at night, in a creaky house in the middle of nowhere, there are no such pleasant distractions. Once the clock struck midnight, you might as well have been the last person on the planet. There was nothing to tell you otherwise.

In those dark, quiet, lonely hours, that's when I was alone with my thoughts. When the sun finally set and my family headed to bed to dream sweet dreams, my brain conjured a highlight reel of all the worst people I'd met, crime scenes I'd been to, autopsies I'd witnessed. All of that would repeat over and over and over again. Not even sleep could keep those thoughts at bay, for when I closed

my eyes they showed up in my nightmares. I was constantly reliving the past, so I rarely slept. I kept the TV on all through the night to keep me company and stop my mind from racing. Under my eyes my skin grew purple as I watched the pale blue screen with tired red eyes. Eventually, the sun rose and I started the cycle all over again. With the sunshine came sufficient distractions to keep the memories that plagued my weary mind at bay. I lived dreading nighttime.

After spending thirty years in policing, running into situations that most people run away from, I can't say I'm afraid of much. No, most healthy fears had been conditioned out of me long ago. But I can say without a doubt that I lived in fear of nighttime when I was alone with only my thoughts. To this day, I still shudder when the sun goes down.

Looking back, the decision to retire from investigating homicides wasn't sudden, though at the time it felt as though it were. I had been nudged toward this decision from the moment I first began my career as a homicide detective, maybe even from my first day on the job as a police officer.

Every case I worked hurt me in an irreparable way. Even years later I'm still attempting to recover from the horrible things I've seen and the trauma I experienced in the process. Each victim's story was a reason to pack it in and retire. I couldn't keep seeing lives lost so senselessly; it wasn't healthy to. But there was always a reason I could find to stay, that kept me from leaving Homicide year after year. For thirteen years, I struggled with the dark subject matter of my investigations. I strove to feel true happiness in a world so overwhelmed by pain, death, and suffering. I wasn't happy, but what did my happiness matter when people were quite literally *dying* in my city?

I felt obligated to continue my work. I had an obligation to my colleagues. Why should I leave them when we all had to bear seeing death and brutality at work each day? They weren't picking up and leaving the job despite all its relentless stressors. I also felt obligated to Toronto's homicide victims. I was good at my job and knew I could help the families of victims and help administer justice where the scales had been tipped inequitably. Why should I leave when I had a role to play in solving homicide cases?

So I continued to work.

As a boy, I'd dreamed about this career, a job with such a significant impact, a job that mattered, where I could help others. I thought I'd found a place for

myself in the world, somewhere I could do good when I decided to be a homicide detective. Dreaming as a child about my future career, and then at the outset of my career as a cadet, I could never have imagined the toll the job would take on my mental health. Truthfully, I don't believe anyone should work that close to tragic deaths for so long. It changes you. The ways in which I saw people's lives and bodies harmed and disrespected were worse than even my wildest, most frightful anxieties could imagine. I was intimately acquainted with all the ways in which a human body could be brought to its death, and could never forget it. I would conduct a risk assessment wherever I went, in whatever new situation I was in, analyzing the likelihood of something going awry. I knew all the ways ordinary, everyday life could suddenly stumble into tragedy.

I saw throughout the years of my career that nobody is safe from the evil lurking among us. Death is indiscriminate; it doesn't require that you draw attention to yourself in any way. The most mundane of people, with the most average lives, have been targeted and brutally murdered. There's truly no way to hide, no way to know when someone with fatal intentions enters your life. It's not fair — life rarely ever is — but death never seems to be so. How could it be that someone who is so loved and valued could be taken away from those who love them most? Or that someone so young could have their life ended before it ever really began? Not even the worst of people deserve for their lives to be taken from them in such a cruel and calloused way. To not have a modicum of kindness shown to them even in the last moments of their lives, as if their lives were worthless. Nobody deserves such treatment. How someone can hurt another human being so inhumanely will never make sense to me.

Ultimately, I think what hurt me even more than the cruelty and horror I saw on a daily basis was the sadness I witnessed. There's a flip side to homicide so often forgotten. Yes, murders are gruesome and chilling. Yes, the details of a homicide case are often the sorts of details horror movies are made of — the man with the knife, the blood, the gore, the scream that pierces through the night striking terror into the hearts of listeners. But there's a profound sadness to it, too, and an unexpected softness in that sadness that we're not often shown in books or on TV. Murder is made not only of the stuff that sends a shiver up your spine. It's not only the things that go bump in the night and make you look over your shoulder when you're walking alone. It's also the grief that can

send you spiralling into a bottomless pit of sorrow. Homicide is the soft petals of funeral lilies, the dark earth thrown upon a casket, the empty bedroom filled with the belongings of a person who will never again use them, the sleepless nights that haunt you when you're missing someone more than you ever knew you could. It's more these things, these sad experiences, than it is blood, guns, courtrooms, and criminals.

I have, of course, only lived one side of homicide. For that I'm eternally thankful. I've played the role of the detective in each case I investigated throughout my career. So my perspective on murder and manslaughter cases has focused on the criminal aspect of homicides in Toronto. But I've seen into the other side — watching families mourn their loved ones, breaking the news to parents that their children are dead. To the families and friends of homicide victims, who I consider to be victims themselves, there's another side to these stories, a more complex one. The story of it never getting any easier. The story of having to bury someone you never got to say goodbye to. The story of knowing you'll live the rest of your life without them. The story of grief that is so deep and powerful it could eat you alive from the inside out like a black hole.

There is a whole other story to be told about all these cases by someone other than myself. This is just my perspective, the roles my colleagues and I had in the stories of these victims, but they had whole lives that were meaningful, and wonderful, and complex, long before their deaths. It's hard knowing the only part of them I'll ever truly know is the worst part, the part where they died and all the morbid details associated with that. My work began when their lives ended. I never got to hear their laughs or see their kindness. I've only heard stories about who it was they really were. The version of them I came to know is one shown to me through the filter of their loved ones. I'm grateful that I've had the opportunity to know pieces of them, but I will always wish I could have known them in life under different circumstances.

I can still see the grief in the eyes of the families of the victims whose deaths I investigated. I knew, looking at them, there would be nothing I could ever do to repair them. No amount of investigative work, no guilty plea, no life sentence could give them any peace. I couldn't help them heal. In that way, I very much felt helpless in a situation in which others were in need of help I couldn't provide. All I could do is what I knew how to do — investigate a homicide, find

high-quality and honest evidence, and package the case up, with all its details, to give to the Crown to prosecute. So I would often drive home each night after long hours spent at work and wish I could have done more, wanted to comfort the families and friends of the deceased in some way I didn't quite know how.

Yes, the decision to leave Homicide came after years of personal pain, years of watching others suffer. I wanted to be as far away from the job as possible, I wanted to get out of police work for good. It was a decision I made for my own health, but it wasn't an easy one.

I remember being interviewed by Cam Wooley, a reporter who had been an Ontario Provincial Police officer, about Dr. Elana Fric-Shamji's death. Cam worked for CP24 at the time. He was a jolly reporter and had fans all across the Greater Toronto Area. After our interview, when the microphones were off and the cameras shut down, Cam looked at me with knowing eyes. "How's it going, Steve?"

I sensed he already knew the answer. "I'm done," I replied. Those words exiting my mouth even surprised me. "I'm done," I said again, as if reassuring myself that's what I wanted to say.

Cam nodded sympathetically before pulling his cellphone out of his pocket and quickly calling a number. He lifted the phone to his ear and waited as it rang for a few seconds, then said, "Hi, Joanne, I have someone you might want to speak to."

He handed me the cellphone. On the other end of the line was Joanne MacDonald. At the time, she was the vice-president of CTV News Toronto. After that introduction, we started speaking about my potential transition to a new career in news media.

I can't thank Cam enough for throwing me a lifeline while I was drowning at sea, and Joanne for taking a chance on me.

So I retired. After so long only knowing how to do a single thing, after over a decade of being a homicide investigator, I was unsure of who I was. Since I was a teenager, I had only ever been a police officer. Suddenly, I was just *Steve*. To anyone who has retired from a near-lifelong career, I'm sure this sounds familiar. We become so defined by what we do and not who we are, especially working in a high-stakes role. When suddenly you're left to just be *you*, it takes a lot to figure out who that *you* really is.

I spent the summer of the year I retired doing things I enjoyed, spending time with my family, figuring out where my life would go next, now without the one thing that had defined and controlled my life for thirty years. It was a strange feeling. Finally, I was untethered from the pager and cellphone whose notifications I dreaded. Finally, when something bad happened in the city, I wasn't the first to know about it. I found out the next morning, reading the news, just like everyone else. I was stripped of everything that had made me who I was. I felt like a new person in a new life. I mowed the lawn. I bought a dog. I went fishing with my son in the river. I played a lot of golf. I was learning to take life easy. But I always felt as if there was something wrong, something scratching at the back of my mind. Retiring doesn't purge the bad memories. You can't run away from those, can't relax so much that they're forgotten. No matter how blue the sky was, no matter how sweetly the birds sang, I'd be reminded of them, if only for a fleeting moment. Suddenly, the hotel room of the Delta Chelsea would flash before my eyes, or the bedroom of Katelynn Sampson. I'd be brought back to how it felt to be standing there, seeing the blood, smelling the autopsies, feeling my tie constricting my neck like a snake. No, I couldn't retire from my memories.

I wrote at the outset of this story that Homicide never really *leaves* you. I'll repeat it here because it's true. It's been nearly five years since I left the job, and I still feel so defined by the victims of the homicides I investigated and my role as an investigator. I can still see their faces whenever I close my eyes. I've never really left the Homicide office at police headquarters on College Street. A part of me will always remain there no matter where I go. Clearly, it's true that my mind is stuck in my past. I wrote all these pages about the memories I can never forget, after all, to tell the stories that I'll remember until the day I, too, die. Somewhere deep down I'll always be a homicide detective. I'll always be that young man who strode into his new office reminded of his new duties by the plaque on the wall that read: "No greater honour will ever be bestowed on an officer, or a more profound duty imposed on him, than when he is entrusted with the investigation of the death of a human being."

I'd been called to fulfill a profound duty. I'd worked to be worthy of that honour for thirteen years. My identity was intertwined with the role of homicide investigator. So, of course, my efforts to relax in early retirement were

unfulfilling. I'd built up a lot of trauma, yes, but I'd also accumulated a wealth of knowledge while working investigating homicides. As much as I could try to forget it, no amount of mowing the lawn or walking the dog could erase the work I'd done and the things I'd learned. I never really gained the distance I wanted from Homicide and policing. To do so, I'd have to forget my entire life.

So, in 2017, I went back to work, taking up a new career at CP24 in which I analyze crime in the city on a daily basis. It was a way for me to stay connected to my roots, using the knowledge I'd gained in thirty years of policing to help Toronto and the Greater Toronto Area understand the things that are happening in the city and stay connected and alert. In my current career as a crime analyst for CP24, I'm always reminded every day of the heartache and trauma that used to be my day-to-day. Now, however, I'm far enough removed from the crimes themselves that I can go home each night and truly turn off the never-ending reel of sadness that used to play through my head twenty-four hours a day. It's been five years since I left the job. Every day it gets a little easier to live in the present. Slowly but surely, I'm learning to live life for the living again.

All that being said, I can never forget. I carry each homicide I investigated with me every day of my life. It's just getting a little easier to do so.

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About the Author

STEVE RYAN ALWAYS KNEW HE wanted to be a cop — but had no idea he would one day become an author. Steve began his career with the Toronto Police as a cadet at eighteen years old. He spent nearly thirty years in policing, thirteen of those working as a detective in the homicide squad. After investigating over 150 suspicious deaths in Toronto, Steve left policing to work as a reporter at Bell Media's news channel CP24. You can now catch him driving around Toronto with a microphone in his hand, reporting on the city's breaking news.